

## 2 Witnessing in Solidarity: Recording the Legacy of Shaheen Bagh through Visual Art<sup>6</sup>

### Introduction

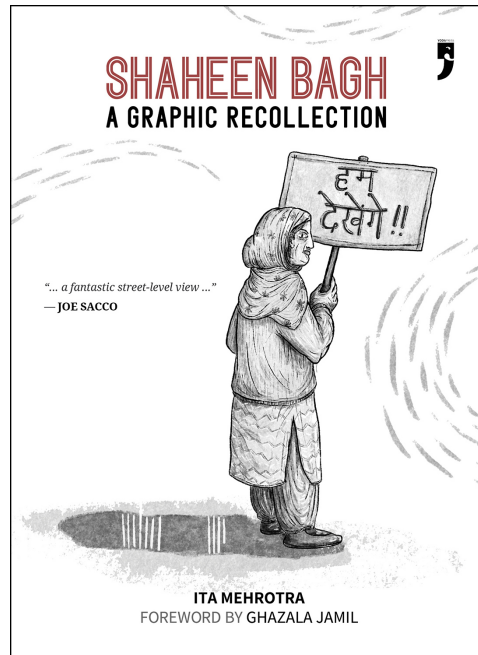
Beginning on 15 December 2019, residents of the neighbourhood of Shaheen Bagh in New Delhi began an indefinite sit-in blockade on the highway following the brutal police crackdown on peacefully protesting Jamia Millia University students. The 101 days of protest in the winter of 2019–2020 against the new Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) were extraordinary in many ways. As media reports and a growing body of research literature documents, the movement featured Muslim women as protest leaders and thus contributed to a shift in the gendered perception of the Muslim minority (Bhatia & Gajjala 2020; Faisal 2020; Hashmi 2022; Kapoor 2022) and to new forms of (feminist) solidarity and re-appropriations of non-violent protest strategies (Bhatia 2021; Sengupta 2021; Rai 2022; Mitra 2023), including digital tools that facilitated the transnationalisation of the movement (Basu 2021; Edwards & Ford 2021; Edwards et al. 2023; Gajjala et al. 2023). With its production of iconic images of students, veiled women and grandmothers opposing a Hindu nationalist state apparatus, Shaheen Bagh became a symbol of resistance and immediately part of a counter-hegemonic national consciousness and memory.<sup>7</sup>

Art, especially street art and performances, came to be a distinct feature of the protest site and was incorporated as means of communicating and building a collective identity (Ghosh 2020). Consequently, several artists took to document-

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<sup>6</sup> A shorter first version of this chapter has been published in Dastavezi. See Titzmann (2023b).

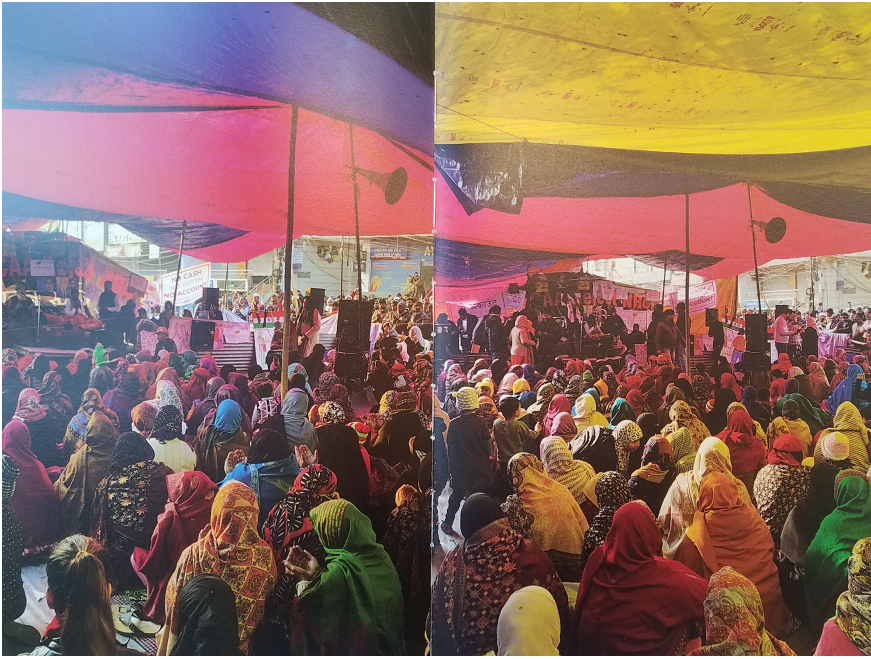
<sup>7</sup> I will not elaborate on the political background and timeline of the Shaheen Bagh protests, as they are well documented elsewhere. For example, two detailed journalistic accounts were instantly published after the movement ended abruptly through the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. See Mustafa (2020) and Salam (2020).



**Figure 1.** *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* by Ita Mehrotra (2021). © Yoda Press

ing the events. This article introduces the works of two young women artists among the many who stood in solidarity on-site and used their artistic capacities and reach to stand witness and to produce testimonials for future generations. It explores how remembering and mediating the legacy of Shaheen Bagh is central to Ita Mehrotra's graphic novel *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* (2021) (Fig. 1) and Prarthna Singh's photo book *Har Shaam Shaheen Bagh* (2022) (Fig. 2). Whereas photography is a classic visual medium and hundreds of photographs of the events were published in the media, the graphic novel in question is situated in between literature, journalism and visual art in that it tells a story in the style of a report, including interviews and featuring the artist herself on her quest of documenting what Shaheen Bagh was. By means of these two examples, this article investigates practices of visually mediating the legacy of that movement by examining the following questions: *What is solidarity, and how can it be produced and mediated via art and media? Which narrative(s) of Shaheen Bhag do they communicate? What are the predominant visual tropes found in the two works? How do they link gender and resistance in their narratives? Which spaces are opened up by their artistic intervention? How do the artists position themselves and frame their work?*

Methodologically, I carried out a mixed-method visual and content analysis of the two works and conducted qualitative interviews with both artists



**Figure 2.** *Har Shaam Shaheen Bagh* (2022, 6–7) by Prarthna Singh. © Prarthna Singh

(ca. one hour each) that were enhanced by further personal and email communication in the process of analysis and writing. With support of the software program MAXQDA,<sup>8</sup> I developed code derived from my research questions and applied it in both the textual analysis of the interviews and the visual analysis of the photographs and the graphic novel. I linked my own interpretation with the accounts of the artists and discussed them, considering the existing research literature and central arguments contained therein.

### **Artistic Expressions in Shaheen Bagh: Catalysts for Solidarity and Contributor to Collective Memory**

In the context of Shaheen Bagh, traditional protest media such as leaflets were used alongside digital tools for mobilisation and documentation. Several scholars have examined strategies of digital activism and transnationalisation of the

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<sup>8</sup> MAXQDA is a software program designed for computer-assisted qualitative and mixed-methods data, text and multimedia analysis.

anti-CAA movement (Bhatia & Gajjala 2020; Basu 2021; Edwards & Ford 2021; Edwards et al. 2021). Singh's and Mehrotra's visual documentations belong to a larger context of integrating art into protest and vice versa (Agrawal 2020). The protest site was vibrating with masses of protestors, with political slogans and speeches. It also came alive through overlapping ways of performative, visual and audible artistic expressions: street art, theatre performances, songs and poetry. Graffiti and murals<sup>9</sup> greeted those nearing the space and were immediately painted over by the government after the protests were disbanded on March 24, 2020 with the onset of the first COVID-19-related nationwide lockdown. 'The white walls of Shaheen Bagh are symbols – of oppression, of erasure and of resistance', writes Adrija Ghosh (2020, 4). Many initiatives, such as an open library in the middle of the protest site or art programmes for children that were taken care of in the makeshift crèche, became symbols of what Shaheen Bagh characterised beyond its immediate political activism: 'Shaheen Bagh was not only about politics, but it was also about art and education, and about the women who braved the Delhi winter and sat with strangers in solidarity against the iron fist of the government' (Ghosh 2020, 3). Adding to that, the protests were marked by a high degree of intermediality, as protestors and observers, journalists and citizens recorded and documented the movement. Digital media was used extensively for circulation, distribution and re-circulation. Mehrotra's and Singh's visual documentation is different than the impromptu on-site art and performance, as their publications were planned and curated and involved longer production process in assembling or drawing. Through that, they combine the dimensions of curating, circulating and claiming memories, as both artists are themselves very active on social media.

Visual activism is one of the central media spaces of resistance (McGarry et al. 2020, 27) in that it 'works to record things, to represent, to signify, to make visible, to argue, to create affect, and the form can be frivolous or meaningless' (McGarry et al. 2020, 24). Visual culture can cut across linguistic and 'speak' about things that are not immediately visible. Herwitz considers French philosopher Jacques Rancière's notion that the politics of dissent are about 'issuing forth new forms of visibility to challenge the state by bringing to light its fault lines and forms of exclusion' (2021, 16) and further argues that 'Rancière's idea finds its perfect home in characterising one of the great possibilities of photography – its ability to render visible that which is otherwise consigned to darkness within a democratic (or other) dispensation' (ibid., 17). The role of

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<sup>9</sup> Delhi-based Fearless Collective documented their famous mural at Shaheen Bagh on their website. See Fearless Collective.



**Figure 3.** Instagram post by @ita\_mehrotra during the ongoing protests in January 2020 (Screenshot). © Ita Mehrotra

visual art is particularly important in the context of producing protest narratives. Herwitz (2021, 5) writes on the capabilities of visual art: ‘Visual art can bring home the raw intensities of reality, in a way that cries out for action’. Writing specifically about the graphic narrative of protest, Salmi (2021) emphasises that these narratives function as ‘intermedial texts’: ‘it is precisely when prose fails, or there are no words to be had, that the intermedial text bears witness to its failure and presents alternative avenues for confronting state force’ (Salmi 2021, 171).

The two examples at hand do feature textual components, though. The genre of the graphic novel usually combines text and images and, therefore, sets the narrative. Unlike a conventional novel, the graphic storyline does not narrate everything in detail: certain passages remain purely visual (Salmi 2021). Singh’s photos come without captions but are integrated into a larger multimedia project that includes writings. Singh is very active on social media and circulated some of the series’ photographs prior to the book launch via her Instagram account (@prarthnasingh) and added text in varying lengths. Ita Mehrotra is active on social media as well and regularly posted drawings from the protest site of Shaheen Bagh on her Instagram account (@ita\_mehrotra) before the book was completed and published in 2021 (Fig. 3).

In a recent edited volume, Merrill et al. (2020) examine the ‘digital practices of social movements’ memory work’, focusing on the curation, circulation

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**Figure 4.** Instagram post by @prarthnasingh on Independence Day 2020, almost five months after the protest was dissolved (Screenshot). © Prarthna Singh

and claiming of memories. By ‘claiming’ they mean the appropriation of – in particular, digital – spaces for counter-histories (Merrill et al. 2020, 17). Although not exclusively digital, the two artists at issue in this article engage in exactly these tactics of curating a living archive, circulating and remediating a narrative that they would like to preserve as cultural memory. Both productions are intended as contributions towards a collective memory of Shaheen Bagh and were thoroughly and thoughtfully curated and are, thus, embedded in the artists’ narration of events, aesthetic choice, and political and social positionality as well as within their media practices of circulation (Fig. 4).

### Protest and Witnessing: Two Women – Two Books

Prarthna Singh is a graduate from the Rhode Island School of Design and currently resides in Mumbai. Her work explores female identity in contemporary India, within the intersection of gender and nation. Working across digital media, film and video, Singh’s photographs have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and several other magazines and newspapers. Earlier works include a series of portraits of Indian female wrestlers who later attracted media attention in 2023 for their protest against sexual harassment by the president of the Wrestling Federation of India (Rajvanshi 2023).

Select photographs of Prarthna Singh’s photo series *Har Shaam Shaheen Bhag* were first published in the US-American photography magazine *Aperture*

(summer 2021) with an accompanying article by Kamayani Sharma. Earlier and repeatedly circulated via Instagram, she finally self-published her photo book in 2022 in collaboration with the designers Sameer Kulavoor and Zeenat Kulavoor. It is a multimedia portrait that includes photographs, drawings, songs, letters and other memorabilia.

While the women's portraits are the core of the artists' series, the book also features a comprehensive appendix with translations into English, Hindi and Urdu and further information on the movement. Upon its launch, the book received very appreciative reviews in the press, including *The Indian Express* (Fernando 2022) and the *British Journal of Photography* (Fletcher 2022).

Har Shaam Shaheen Bagh is my attempt to resist the active erasure of a political moment, one that was brought to an abrupt halt with the onset of the pandemic and one that is scarcely addressed in popular discourse even two years later. This book bears witness to friendship, to love, to the possibility of joy in the face of violence. (Singh 2022, Appendix)

The photo series is the result of Singh's regular visits to the protest site and her interaction with the protesting women of all ages. Several of the women were involved in the creation of the book by contributing writings or drawings.

Also, as the book happened to be published during Ramadan 2022, Prarthna Singh celebrated its launch along with this group of women with an *iftar*<sup>10</sup> in New Delhi (Fig. 5). Forms of reciprocity are integral to Singh's work. The artist writes on the last pages of her book:

In the first week of January I joined the Shaheen Bagh movement as a protestor. As friendships were struck, and meals were shared, I gradually began to make images. This growing intimacy soon took on a tactile form. For every portrait I made, I created an identical Polaroid or "jadoo ka kaagaz" ("magic paper") as they were playfully renamed, to give the women and children I photographed. A few days in, we had set up an impromptu photo studio, as my documentation became a community exercise. [...] Har Shaam Shaheen Bagh was made across several days and nights, over innumerable meals of biryani, warm embraces and tender exchanges. Some of the portraits made on-site have been layered with images of shawls and burqas worn by fellow protestors, to evoke the camaraderie and kinship that formed the essence of the protest. (Singh 2022, Appendix)

She explained how in the process she used different mediums, ranging from Polaroid to disposable camera, medium format film camera, digital camera and her iPhone: 'I also had to be often not visible, because as soon as you have a

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10 The meal with which Muslims break their fast at sunset.

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**Figure 5.** Instagram story by @prarthnasingh: Book launch with the ladies of Shaheen Bagh, 2022 (Screenshot by author). © Prarthna Singh

camera in your hand and you're a woman, people also ask you questions. I want to make sure that I'm able to be there, not get caught and taken away somewhere' (Prarthna Singh, personal interview, 21/07/2021) (Fig. 6).

Considering theories of media strategies of social movements, I would like to highlight two aspects of this project in particular: first, the act of self-publishing, which corresponds to the processes of curation, circulation and claiming of memories that Merrill et al. (2020) describe (it also represents a form of being the media and producing a counter-narrative in Cammaerts' [2012] understanding of self-mediation); second is the act of witnessing that precedes the process of self-publishing and corresponds to one of the three distinct (but not mutually exclusive) logics that activists ascribe to their protest actions. The logic of bearing witness to injustice operates through tactics that knowingly break what are considered unjust laws or symbolic provocation. During the process of creating the book, the project website explained:





**Figure 6.** Prarthna Singh with two girls holding the Polaroid pictures that they took at the impromptu photo studio in Shaheen Bagh. © harshaamshaheenbagh.com

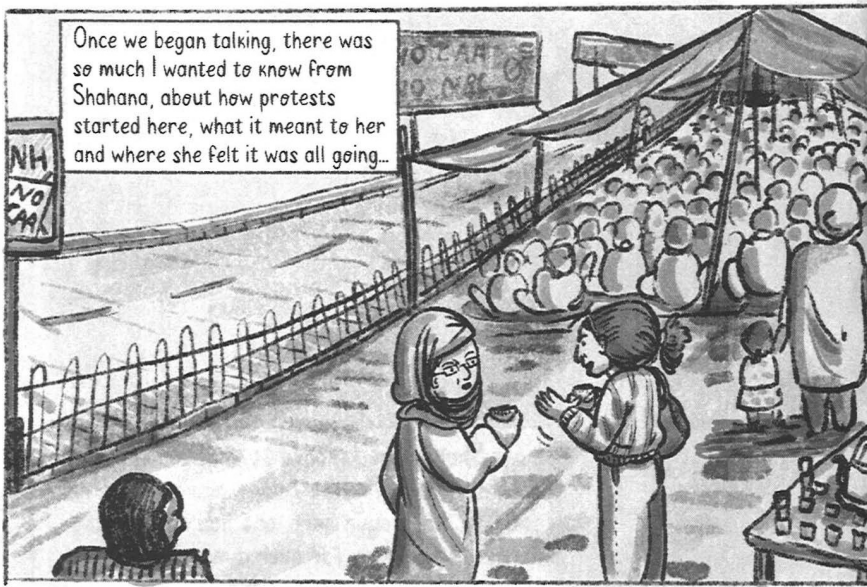
This book will serve as evidence to the revolutionary spirit of the women of our country, an urgent and necessary document that celebrates the very core of our now endangered secular, democratic values. Two years in the making, our project is now in its final stages. Given today's political climate, as independent artists we have decided to self-publish this body of work to retain complete creative and editorial control. ([harshaamshaheenbagh.com](http://harshaamshaheenbagh.com), accessed January 11, 2022)

Ita Mehrotra faced similar obstacles in finding a publisher for her graphic novel *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection*, which finally was published by independent Yoda Press in 2021. Mehrotra graduated with an MPhil in feminist graphic narratives in contemporary India from the Arts and Aesthetics School, Jawaharlal Nehru University, in 2017. She is a visual artist, arts researcher and educator with published and exhibited works by [thewire.in](http://thewire.in), Zubaan Books, the Goethe Institute, AdAstra Comix and others. She currently serves as creative director of Artreach India, a non-profit arts education initiative for children, young people and women from marginalised communities across India (Artreach India).

Her highly acclaimed graphic novel tells the story of the Muslim women who started the protest at Shaheen Bagh.<sup>11</sup> It is based on conversations and

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<sup>11</sup> See reviews, i.e. Raina (2022); HT Weekend (2021); Khalid (2021).



**Figure 7.** Beginning the conversation with Shahana (Mehrotra 2021, single image from a panel on p. 16). © Yoda Press

interviews and drawings that the artist made during her own participation in the protest (Fig. 7).

Mehrotra's book appears journalistic in its retelling of the story of the protest. With reference to Salmi's (2021) conception of graphic novels as intermedial texts, Mitra (2023, 3) states that 'in utilising a graphic medium for memorialising such protest, the affects used for carrying out resistance through the protest could be portrayed more effectively through using this "intermedial text" rather than through solely prose or the spoken word'. In her excellent analysis of Mehrotra's depiction of strategies of affects of safety and emotional solidarity through sharing food, songs and artwork, Mitra's (2023) explores the interplay between collectivity, mobilising emotions and political effectiveness in depth.

Ita Mehrotra situates herself in a feminist political trajectory. She does so via the genre of the graphic novel, which is rather new in the Indian art world and travelled from Europe to become an elite subculture in India. Mehrotra classifies it simultaneously as an English-speaking, urban niche with a limited readership and a new and flexible genre that allows for experimentation:

That's exciting also as artists. [...] Some comics makers say it is that because there's no long legacy of like a hundred years of comics here, it's open to a

lot of flexibility of what we want to do at the moment. (Ita Mehrotra, personal interview, 15/10/2023)

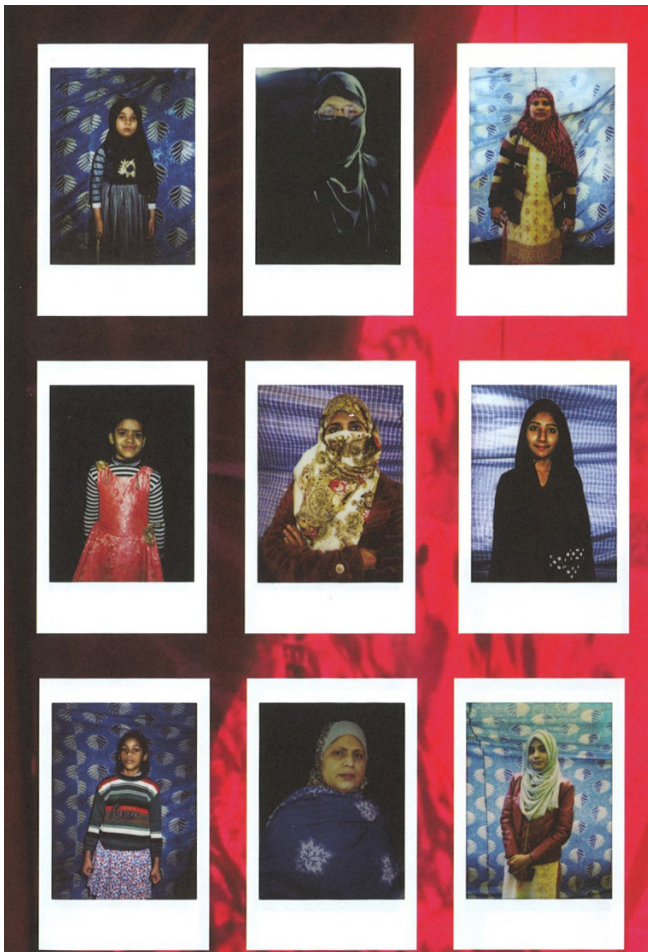
She sees comic makers also as digital art pioneers who have been at the forefront of using these social media platforms as radical art tools. Her strategy of illustrating the women's testimonies and conversations, like Singh's photographs, relates to the strategy of self-mediation by creating space for the voices of those who own a protest, sustaining a counter-narrative, and follows – like Singh's work – the logic of bearing witness.

The books by Singh and Mehrotra are not the only visual testimonies of the Shaheen Bagh protests and related events. Several books have been published to record voices and images, among them the widely discussed photo book *Hum Dekhenge: Protest and Pogrom* (2021), curated by Aasif Mujtaba and Md Meharban and published by White Dot Publishers in New Delhi. Sourced from 24 photographers, artists and journalists with over 200 photos, *Hum Dekhenge* comprises photographs from the events that panned out from 12 December 2019 to 22 March 2020 in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh and protests in other parts of the country. The curators included a majority of young (mostly male) Muslim photographers to let a community tell their own story (Das 2022). While the book received praise by many sympathetic commentators, it also generated controversy around the use of deceased Pulitzer-Prize-winning photographer Danish Siddiqui's name. The curators had dedicated the book to him as their 'mentor', apparently without approval of his family (Express News Service 2022).

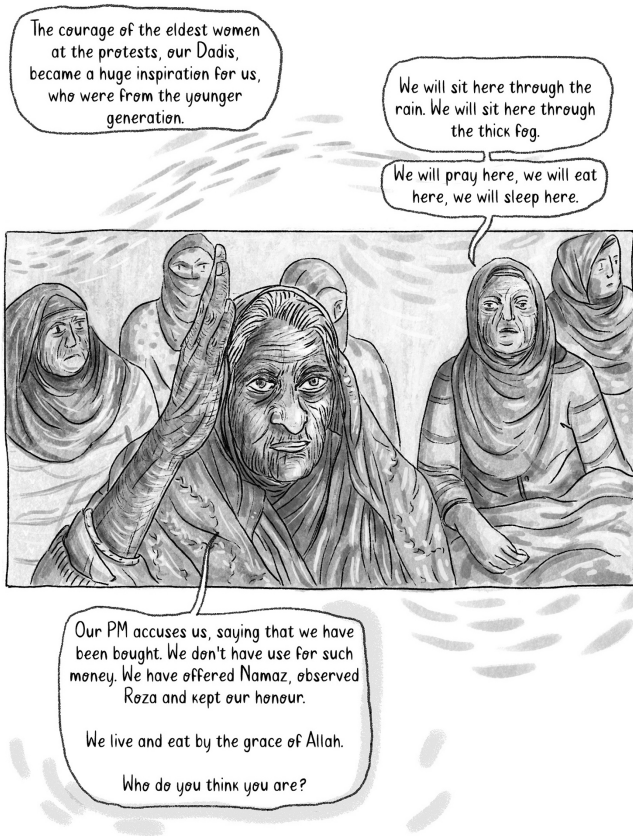
*Hum Dekhenge* deviates from the women-centric narratives of Mehrotra and Singh, with one of the curators, Aasif Mujtaba, crediting himself along with Sharjeel Imam as an initiator of the Shaheen Bagh protest (Mujtaba & Meharban 2021, 11). Singh's and Mehrotra's narratives, on the other hand, emphasise the leaderlessness, spontaneity and female-led nature of the protest site. A further difference in the narrative framework chosen for *Hum Dekhenge* is the incorporation of the pogrom against Muslims in Northeast Delhi in February 2020. The book's introduction tells a linear story from the bravery and hope of Shaheen Bagh, distorted and misused by right-wing propaganda which led to the incitement of the brutal pogrom (ibid., 10–15). Collective remembering is the pivotal purpose of curating the photo book, in order 'to ensure that such barbaric subjugation never disappears from our memory' (ibid., 14). The photographs record violence, insurgency, injuries, death and overall injustice, including some graphic images of murdered people and cut-off limbs. In this, the collection decisively differs from the tales of female solidarity and hope that both Mehrotra and Singh document.

## Telling a Story of Hope and Solidarity: A Contextualised Visual Analysis

At the centre of the visual imagery in both works are images of protesting women: portrait photography by Prarthna Singh and drawn images of narrating individuals and groups of protesting women in Ita Mehrotra's graphic novel. Singh's photographs acquire even more meaning with the larger context of how the artist produced the series as a process of reciprocity, fun and a personal quest to bear witness to that moment and the women of all age groups involved in it (Fig. 8).



**Figure 8.** Polaroid images Singh (2022, 26). © Prarthna Singh



**Figure 9.** Mehrotra (2021, 54). © Yoda Press

On over 100 pages, Mehrotra's graphic novel offers more variety in terms of motifs, but the image of the protesting woman or women dominates here as well. Mehrotra tells her story through the narratives of Shahana and Shafina, two women from Shaheen Bagh, whom we see in close-up portraits, in physical and Zoom conversations with Mehrotra and in action on the protest site. Quotes and depictions of friends, prominent figures of the movement and unnamed co-protestors add to a multi-layered account. Her book also includes drawings of protesting masses where the individual is subsumed.

One particular trope is very prominently represented in both works, that of the inspirational 'dadis', the grandmothers of Shaheen Bagh (Fig. 9 & 10).

Existing research and media discuss how remarkable the presence of older Muslim women over the course of more than three months at Shaheen Bagh was. 'Bilkis Dadi' came to symbolise the entire protest movement, even making



**Figure 10.** Singh (2022, 71). © Prarthna Singh

it onto TIME magazine's list of 100 most influential people (Ayyub 2020). Bilkis credits the fierce Rani Laxmibai, who fought against the British colonisers during the uprising of 1857, as her inspirational idol (Tarrant 2021). Lal (2023) places the stoic presence of the 'dadis' in a historical continuum of *satyagraha*, the Gandhian strategy of non-violent resistance, while a team of feminist researchers examines Twitter publics to map how the 'dadis' emerged as political subjects through transnational media space, even though they themselves did not directly access social media (Gajjala et al. 2023) (Fig. 11).

By foregrounding not only students but mothers, grandmothers and children, the visual imagery emphasises women of all ages as active agents. The gendered particularity of women leading a protest around the question of who can claim citizenship has additional symbolic value in that it counters structural processes of invisibilising women and not circulating their contributions and voices in political movements and in history in general (Rai 2020; Sengupta 2021; Hashmi 2022; Kapoor 2022; Günther 2023). During one of our conversations, Ita Mehrotra referred to earlier movements like the *Chipko Andolan*,<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The *Chipko Andolan* (movement) of the 1970s and 1980s has been a leading example of a nonviolent social and ecological movement by rural villagers in the sub-Himalayan region, particularly women, aimed at protecting trees and forests slated for government-backed logging. See also Chapter 4.



**Figure 11.** Mehrotra (2021, 106). © Yoda Press

where women led the protests but only the names of male leaders appear in history books. Both works intervene exactly at this juncture by making minority women visible and audible in their resistance and document the empowering dynamics of this historical moment. In her introduction to Parthna Singh's photo series in *Aperture*, Sharma observes the 'reciprocal gaze' of Singh's photo subjects in both photographic and political terms as a very familiar one of average women (Fig. 12). She adds that 'Singh's medium-shot compositions emphasise how radical is the very presence of these oft-marginalised, singular bodies on camera, and by extension, as a collective in the agora' (Sharma 2021, 126).



**Figure 12.** Singh (2022, 78–79). © Prarthna Singh

### Atmospheric Recollections: Affective Ties and Joyful Hope

The stories as told by the two artists are aligned to the self-mediated discourse of the movement that can be accessed through empirical research and accounts of protestors.<sup>13</sup> In keeping with the visual staging of emotional warmth, during our conversations both artists spoke of sisterhood, friendship, kinship, honesty, togetherness, empathy and good conversations. In opposition to Indian mainstream media representations that sought to malign and discredit the protestors as ‘anti-national’ troublemakers, Singh describes a joyful place featuring songs, plays and children. Mitra (2023) remarks that mobilising affects of safety through singing songs is a distinct protest strategy that not only characterised Shaheen Bagh but many non-violent movements before and after it. ‘Affects like persuasiveness, affective information, excitement, inspiration, empathy and hope are central to communal singing, the affective quality of protest songs has played a crucial role for centuries in mobilising people for resistance’ (Mitra 2023, 8). Singh included hand-written poems and songs in her book (Singh

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<sup>13</sup> I.e. Salam (2020), Mustafa (2020), Mujtaba & Meharban (2021).



2022, 16; 52; 109). Two songs whose performance has been illustrated in Mehrotra's graphic novel are Varun Grover's *Kagaz Nahi Dikhaenge*<sup>14</sup> and Faiz Ahmad Faiz's *Hum Dekhenge*. The latter became the national anthem of the protest and was sung worldwide in the many global demonstrations against the CAA. It became the name-giver for Mujtaba and Meharban's photo book and, eventually, the cover design of Ita Mehrotra's book. Analysing the presence of these songs within Mehrotra's book, Mitra (2021, 10) argues, '[t]he affects that are in play here are empathy and hope'.

Going to Shaheen Bagh felt like going to a place where you were going to meet like-minded people, you will be hearing these songs, these young girls would put up street plays, every evening they would have different performers and artists and musicians come and it really gave you a lot of hope. So, I think that idea of within all of what was happening in India at that moment, Shaheen Bagh was really full of colour, it was full of joy, it was full of camaraderie. (Prarthna Singh, personal interview, 21/07/2021)

## Visualised Solidarity

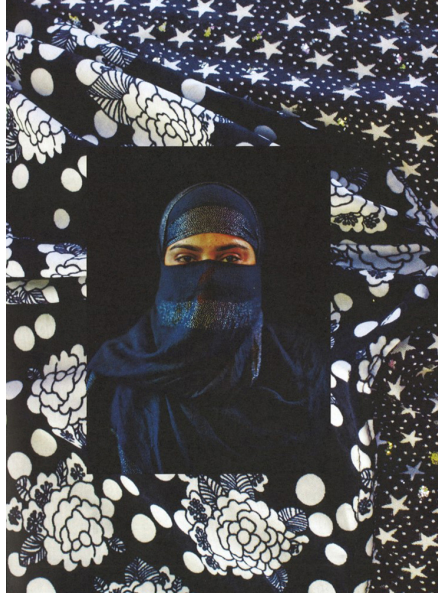
Mitra discusses what she calls 'anti-individualistic tactics', such as hospitality, female bonding, confidentiality, defiance (of gender roles), empathy, and love and comradeship as affects in circulation in the protest site and represented in Mehrotra's graphic recollection. She argues that '[t]hese affects are collectively utilised to impart feelings of safety and security, which forms the overall affective strategy of the protest' (Mitra 2023, 4). Not only Mehrotra visualises solidarity through reference to material sharing of clothes, food and care responsibilities: in Singh's portraits, the background of shawls used during the protest refers to the cold winter nights that posed an additional challenge to the perseverance of the protestors, but also to the ethics of care and reciprocal solidarity in keeping each other warm by sharing these shawls (Fig. 13). 'Through the harsh winter, the warmth of shared shawls thrown across shoulders in solidarity became part of the pictorial narrative' (Sharma 2021, 126) (Fig. 14).

Mehrotra draws images of protesting masses and adds their accounts of how people felt 'warm' despite the cold, indicating the affective ties that kept the protestors together and their spirits up. What Mitra (2023) terms 'anti-individualistic tactics' Bhatia and Gajjala call the 'ethics of care', which, they argue, are closely linked to certain practices of 'organic' solidarity that is con-

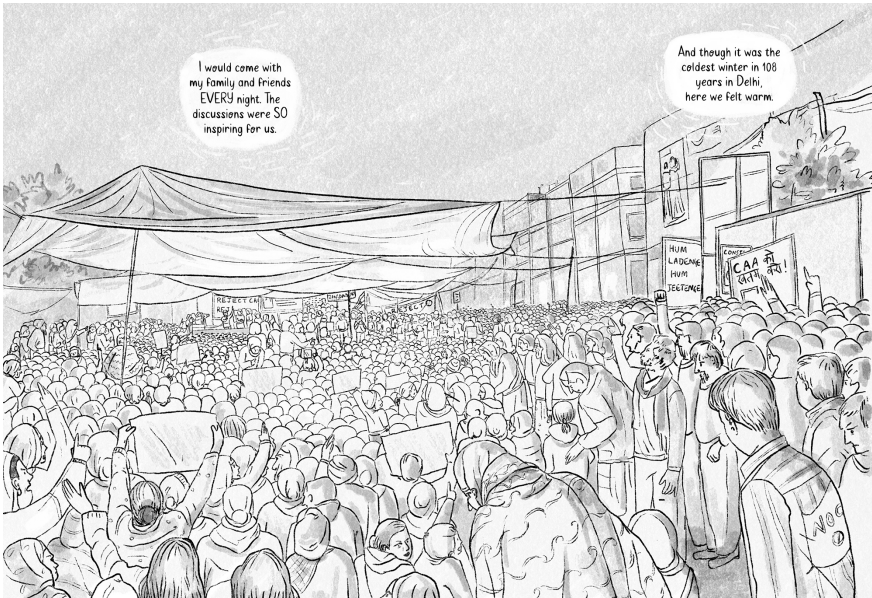
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<sup>14</sup> *Kagaz Nahi Dikhaenge* is a poem that Grover wrote and then recited on Twitter in December 2019 to protest the CAA and NRC.

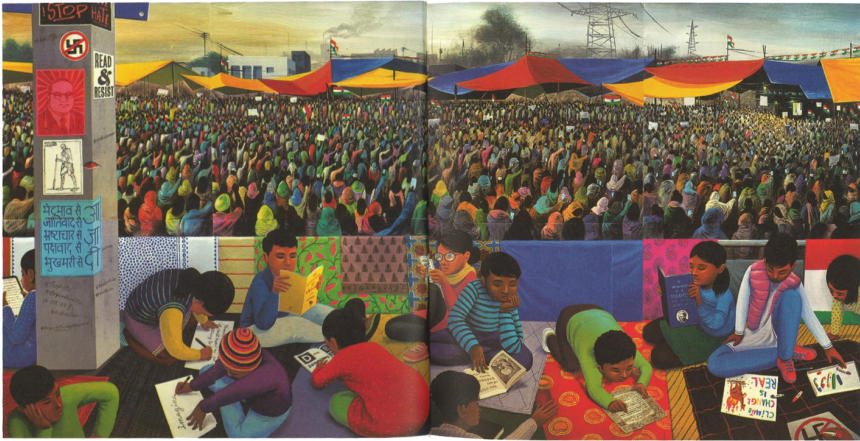
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**Figure 13.** Singh (2022, 13). © Prarthna Singh



**Figure 14.** Mehrotra (2021, 52–53). © Yoda Press



**Figure 15.** Drawing by Sameer Kulavoor titled *Read & Resist* (2020) in Singh (2022, 40–41). © Prarthna Singh

stituted through sharing of food, care and organisational responsibilities. The protest strategy of mobilising affects through food has its roots in the Sikh religious tradition of *langar*. In several of Mehrotra’s images, it is men who prepare tea or food to support the protesting women. ‘The use of *langar* by Muslim and Sikh men and women to combat Muslim persecution under Hindu fanaticism recontextualises *langar* in a unique expression of secularism. At the same time, it challenges gender roles in both communities, underlining the importance of seeing Shaheen Bagh as a feminist radical social protest’, observes Mitra (2023, 7).

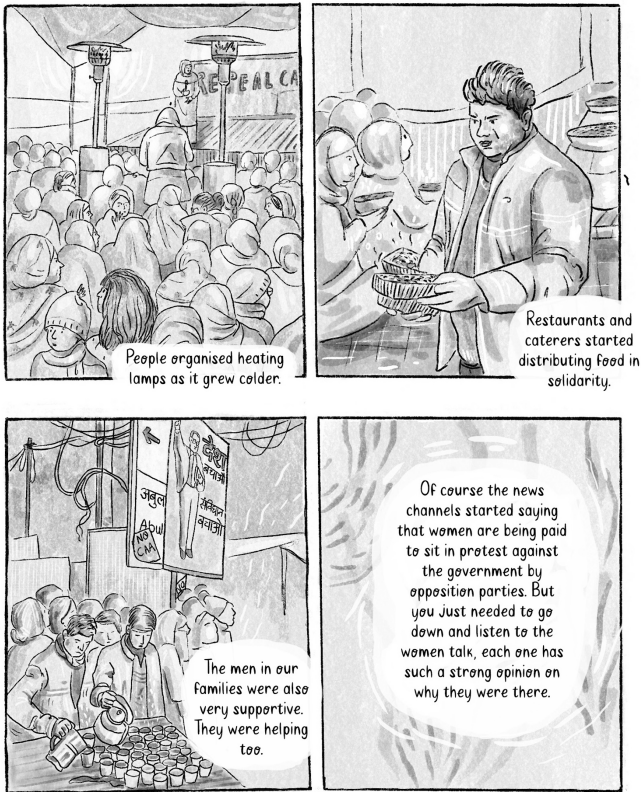
Relating to the aspect of mutually caring for each other, Singh talked about the makeshift crèche (Fig. 15):

There was a proper site, there was people selling tea, you know like everything kind of organically grew around the site. All the shops in that area were shut, but they had built a makeshift crèche for the children, whose mothers would be at the protest site and the Jamia students were running this incredible crèche. (Prarthna Singh, personal interview, 21/07/2021)

She interprets this as an invocation of local repertoires of solidarity, which Rakopoulos (2016) termed the ‘re-contextualisation of village-hood’ in times of crisis:

That to me is like the essence of India, you go to somebody’s house in India and [...] no matter what their social economic background is, they will always, always make sure they have arranged tea or a meal for you. (Prarthna Singh, personal interview, 21/07/2021)

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**Figure 16.** Practices of solidarity and resistance to counter attempts to malign the movement by government and mainstream media. In: Mehrotra (2021, 47). © Yoda Press

In line with Mehrotra's and Singh's account and depiction of Shaheen Bagh, Bhatia and Gajjala conclude: 'Embodying care translated into practising non-violence at the protest site and challenges the legitimacy of violence enacted by the police, the government, and those supporting the CAA and the NRC in India' (Bhatia & Gajjala 2020, 6299) (Fig. 16).

Understanding the ethics of care as a decisively female way of resistance brings some problematic connotations with it. Günther (2023) discusses how 'body politics' have emerged as a gendered method of protest against the background of patriarchal regulations of female bodies all across the world. Nevertheless, the emphasis of an ethics of care, i.e. food-sharing, childcare and organising in female-led protests, speaks to an essentialised notion of femininity associated with these practices and romanticises care without reflecting on the problematic linking of (unpaid) care work and femininity.

## Challenges to Gendered (In)visibility and Religious Stereotypes

The way the women of Shaheen Bagh challenged both the gendered organisation of their own community and the gendered visibility and mobility in public space deserves special attention (Bhatia 2021; Ray 2022; Chopra & Sanyal 2023). The emergence of ‘body politics’ (Günther 2023) as a decisively gendered way of staging resistance has its roots in the image of women and their fixed social roles that locate the female body in the private sphere. Secondly, Günther (2023, 209) argues that rigid sexual policies to control the population of modern states contributed to the female body being objectified and labelled as something that must be treated and policed by the state. By confronting the state forces physically, the women of Shaheen Bagh embodied resistance to state control on various levels. Bhatia and Gajjala (2020) note that public space in India is not only patriarchal but also Hindu-dominated, and the predominantly Muslim women protesting in Shaheen Bagh used their bodies to break through this logic of visibility. Therefore, it is particularly noteworthy that Muslim women were appropriating the ‘hostile’ public space and reconfiguring it as an inclusive and democratic place of participation, changing the meaning of public spaces and making them accessible to marginalised people (Fig. 17). The visibility of women in protest movements is not unique; however, the visibility of Muslim women in this particular scenario represents bravery and an attempt to counter global stereotypes of oppressed Muslim women whose men are terrorists (Bhatia & Gajjala 2020, 6293).

This was just so radical, more radical than feminist groups organising it. [...] They’re kind of taking over the highway. So, that control of public space to begin with was just mind blowing for anybody in Delhi, not just Shaheen Bagh. As a woman I’ve grown up in Delhi and I’ve been here most of my life, I’ve never experienced that. The liberation from the first time that I walked in to that space, I just couldn’t believe what was happening, there was the highway, this huge highway that links Delhi to Noida, is blocked and there’s women sitting on the road and [...] not just talking against the CAA, but also explaining and putting down really strongly what the country should do, what should Modi do, what should he do with employment and education, universities, protection of women in hostels. (Ita Mehrotra, personal interview, 15/10/2021)

In her narrative, Mehrotra links the particularity of this gendered resistance to the observation that she not only witnessed a protest against a specific issue (CAA) but narrates how the protest went beyond it and generated visions of an alternative to the status quo and even a temporarily lived utopia of inclusivity and inter-religious togetherness.

## 2 Witnessing in Solidarity

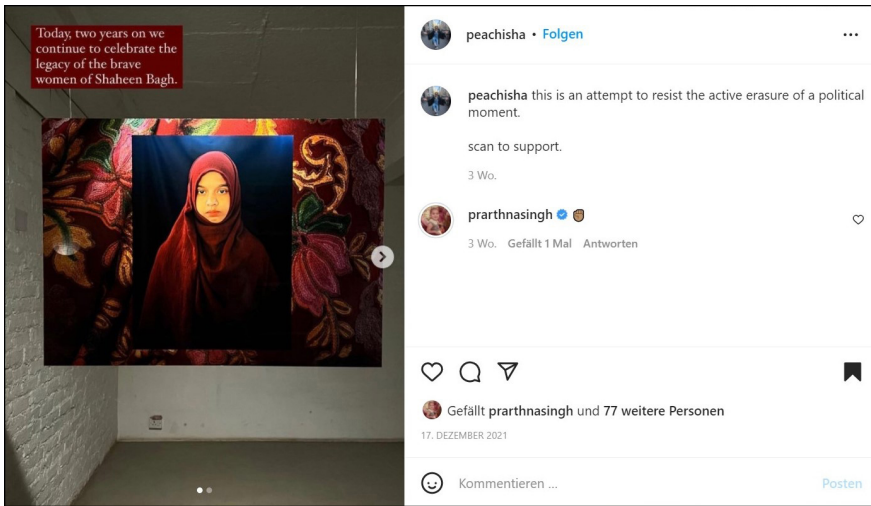


**Figure 17.** Mehrotra (2021, 45). © Yoda Press

Singh's work itself is a testimony to her own solidarity towards the women of Shaheen Bagh, and Mehrotra's graphic account includes several passages dealing with solidarity from all over India and across communities – again, especially through the preparation and sharing of food (Mehrotra 2021, 60; 61) and in particular among different minorities (Mehrotra 2021, 83). All these forms of solidarity can be seen as opening up new physical and discursive spaces.

### New Spaces

As argued above, the sheer physical presence of Muslim women changed the public space. Shahana, Mehrotra's main interlocutor in the graphic novel, is depicted saying: 'From a place of protest, it grew into a space for democratic dialogue. People from across the country were coming to speak and sit with



**Figure 18.** Pop-up display in Delhi of one portrait from Singh’s series marking two years since the protest (Screenshot of Instagram post by @peachisha).

US!’ (Mehrotra 2021, 51). The artist herself remembered, ‘that kind of inverting of public space, I might never see that again. It’s almost like this other world opened up for some time, and it allowed for a very rich, democratic dialogue then’ (Ita Mehrotra, personal interview, 15/10/2021). Singh’s work contributes to this opening of an ‘other world’ by enabling the self-expression of the women in Shaheen Bagh through reciprocity in her artistic process. She also commits to making these effects last through maintaining new friendships and collaboration beyond the actual temporality of the protest and by reclaiming the public sphere through a pop-up exhibition from the photo series in Delhi in December 2021 (Fig. 18).

I had hung one portrait in Delhi to commemorate two years of the protest. December 16th is when the protest began, so that’s the date we hung the image. I also shared a QR code that took you to the website along with it. Just a way for people to engage with the work and learn more about my forthcoming book. Also, most importantly to keep the memory of the resistance alive (Prarthna Singh, email, 17/01/2022).

Circulation as one of the three key digital practices of social movement’s memory work, according to Merrill et al. (2020), keeps the counter-narrative alive and visible and contributes to what Ita Mehrotra similarly aims at by creating room for the diverse voices of the protestors, along with providing historical and political context to the multi-layered story of Shaheen Bagh and documenting sisterhood. In a similar vein, Shalimar Books, a London-based South Asian

bookstore and distributor, launched Ita Mehrotra's graphic novel in the UK in February 2022 and, thus, kept the conversation going. The online launch included a discussion with Ita Mehrotra, Arpita Das of Yoda Press and protestors and activists Atia Khursheed and Safoora Zargar, both of whom were involved in the Shaheen Bagh sit-in and anti-CAA movements. Atia Khursheed is represented as the main narrator Shahana in Mehrotra's book. Safoora Zargar, who, as a student activist from Jamia Millia Islamia University, was arrested and charged with sedition and other serious charges, shared how the book felt like an 'acknowledgement of your struggle', as it makes 'space for yourself in the narrative of the country'.<sup>15</sup>

The medium of comics and graphic narratives itself can be understood as opening up new spaces as well. Salmi (2021) understands graphic novels as inter-medial texts that combine visual and textual elements. Mehrotra added that an important aspect of the medium is the blank spaces on pages of comics and graphic novels that allow readers to 'enter the frames' and imagine what might have happened in between. She further stressed that many Indian comics that have appeared lately on social media are personal narratives that otherwise would not appear in artwork.<sup>16</sup> They invite dialogue on social media in that they respond to the political situation very vocally (Ita Mehrotra, personal interview, 15/10/2021). She confirms Mitra's (2023) analysis of art as a locator of emotions and affects by stressing that 'methods of creative expression provide locators for people to remember what they experienced, maybe why they still feel so strongly to have these kinds of online discussions that happen around the book. Or people sharing something about it on social media and hundred others would say what they feel' (Ita Mehrotra, personal interview, 15/10/2021). Her book thus created a memory of feelings. Mehrotra sees an urgent need for more such spaces and an infrastructure of bold publishing houses and courageous academic and intellectual spaces that allow these works to circulate and to amplify critical voices.

### **Positionality and Framing: Towards Conclusions**

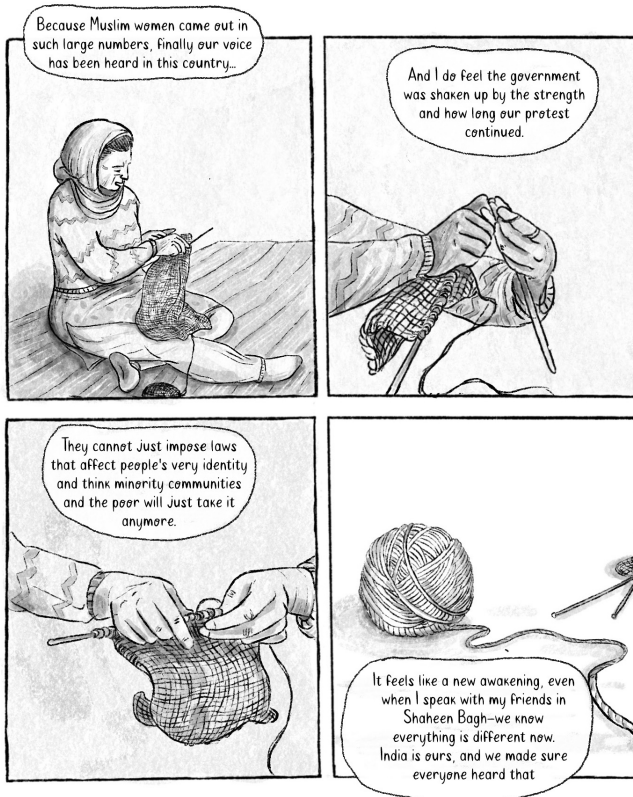
One aim of this article was to go beyond a visual analysis of the works to include the artists' own understanding and framing of their work as acts of aesthetic witnessing, documentation and communicating a political standpoint. Ita Mehrotra describes her artistic process as 'recording histories which otherwise

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<sup>15</sup> The book launch was organised by The Rights Collective and Shalimar Books via Zoom, 23/02/2022.

<sup>16</sup> For further examples of protest comics from India, see Ruya Maps (2020).





**Figure 19.** Knitting as a symbol for memory creation (Mehrotra 2021, 104). © Yoda Press

won't be told from the perspective of individuals who have been part of it, otherwise the grand narratives here of the government and mainstream media are very controlling, they have full power at the moment to tell the story' (Ita Mehrotra, personal interview, 15/10/2021). One of the last images in her book distils this claim, with a woman knitting as a symbol for weaving a narrative and creating memory (Fig. 19).

Bearing witness and recording history are also active attempts to counter the co-option of historical narratives by Hindutva forces and their re-writing of India's history by deleting the histories of minorities and subaltern communities and, thus, re-imagining India as a Hindu nation. In addition, Prarthna Singh sees her book not only as a possibility of returning a reflection of the experiences to the women in Shaheen Bagh but also a means to help her and others to find a closure to these events, which ended abruptly with the first wave of COVID-19 and left most of them isolated, unable to continue their conversation in person.

A feminist-inspired notion of solidarity plays a central role in both artistic processes and the artists' framing. bell hooks (1986) defines sisterhood as political solidarity between women. Mostly, however, this 'woman' turned out to be from the urban middle class, if not rich, and mainly English-speaking. She thus represented and suppressed the voices of village women, poor women, Dalit women, Adivasi women, OBC women and marginalised Muslim women who came from a political orientation that required naming one's social location (Patil 2017). Other than the curators of *Hum Dekhenge* (2021), both artists position themselves partly as outsiders through their privileged position in Indian society (not being of a minority, living in a good urban neighbourhood, being educated). Given her privileged background, Singh emphasised how important the collaboration with women from Shaheen Bagh who are firmly located in that social context is for her. Nevertheless, Singh and Mehrotra see themselves as part of a continuum of transnational female solidarity across communities united against the current government and, beyond that, in a global resistance against racism, ecological destruction and gender inequality. Singh dedicates her books with the following words: 'For the women of Standing Rock and Black Lives Matter, the women of the Dandi March and the Chipko Movement, for those at the front lines of India's non-violent protests, this book is an act of remembrance, to preserve the powerful legacy of women at the forefront of historic revolutions' ([harshaamshaheenbagh.com](http://harshaamshaheenbagh.com)). 'Mehrotra's graphic memoir', writes Mitra (2023, 13), 'participates in this feminist collective struggle [of non-violent resistance] as a postcolonial narrative'. In her introduction to Singh's series, Sharma (2021, 126) concludes: 'Viewing these images is a sort of "being there" too, it mimics the act of witnessing as a civic imperative. The anti-CAA protests that took root across India and included secular-minded Indians of all faiths became a national witnessing of the suffering the government inflicted on its citizens.' Ghazala Jamil's foreword to Mehrotra's book ends by stating that Mehrotra 'does not claim to capture all that Shaheen Bagh was. What she achieves instead is to effectively conjure a channel through which we can partake of the rich legacy of Shaheen Bagh that is now our national heritage' (Mehrotra 2021, 9).

By means of documenting and mediating solidarity through aesthetic witnessing, Ita Mehrotra and Prarthna Singh keep alive a particular narrative of Shaheen Bagh that is represented through visual tropes of female agency and multi-generational and cross-community solidarity and care and links gender and resistance as mutually constituting each other. Their visual art and the accompanying narrative testify that other ways of living together in harmony and solidarity are possible and contribute to opening up new spaces through artistic intervention.