5 Conclusion: Forging Solidarity and Collective Remembering through Mediation

The three case studies discussed in the previous chapters illustrate different approaches to the enactment of solidarity within Indian social and protest movements. Visual art and various forms of media prove to be central to the mediation of solidarity, both in terms of communication and mobilisation and for performative staging. Two components of Cammaerts' categorisation are found to be predominant: first, varying forms of activist self-mediation, and second, the mediation of solidarity via digital media by (external) sympathisers. Central but not exclusive to both strategies is social media labour, the fostering of affective ties and the creation of a collective memory of protest and alternative narratives. Social media labour, according to Bhatia and Gajjala, contributes to 'forms of affective exchanges, such as solidarity building, information exchange, and extending support and/or resources both online and offline' (Bhatia & Gajjala 2020, 6296). The creation of a relational digital space where people experience a sense of connection with those protesting on the streets furthers affect circulation and eventually contributes towards higher visibility (Bhatia & Gajjala 2020, 6295f). In all three case studies, the aspects of immediacy and transcending local (physical) spaces also play a major role. The anti-CAA/NRC protest in Shaheen Bagh and the Farmers' Movement benefited immensely from increased visibility through international support, not least through a sympathetic diaspora. The contemporary youth climate movement already stems from a global network and, thus, a global–local nexus is inherent in its media work in particular.

Mediation Strategies

The act of self-mediation, or 'being the media', serves as a common response to the tendency of mainstream media to overlook or stigmatise social movements. An intriguing illustration of this phenomenon is found in the Farmers' Movement's newsletter *Trolley Times,* which demonstrates how protest can be bolstered through media support and the dissemination of counter-narratives and

solidarity messages. *Trolley Times* aimed to challenge mainstream media narratives, educate about the movement's goals and foster emotional connections among protestors and supporters through a diverse multilingual media approach. Over the course of the one-year farmers' protest, the creation and spread of protest-related materials, symbols and dialogues have contributed to the formation of a shared collective memory. It remains to be explored whether this collective memory will permeate the national consciousness and become an integral part of a broader national narrative. Through the sharing of knowledge, grassroots social movements evolve into 'epistemic communities' (Lipschutz 2001), yet the question arises of whether this community will persist beyond the immediate cause. Similar inquiries arise regarding the enduring impact of Shaheen Bagh, as visually documented in the works of Prarthna Singh and Ita Mehrotra.

One aim of this book was to go beyond a textual and visual analysis of the mediated content and to include the activists' and artists' own understanding and framing of their work as performing politics as acts of solidarity, documenting movements and communicating a political standpoint. For instance, Ita Mehrotra characterises her creative approach as capturing narratives that would otherwise remain untold, particularly from the viewpoints of individuals directly involved. She highlights the dominance of overarching narratives controlled by the government and mainstream media, emphasising their significant influence in shaping the current storytelling landscape. Her graphic novel is, thus, both an activist self-mediation and a mediation of solidarity with the primary affected communities. Singh and Mehrotra both frame their intervention as 'witnessing'. On one side, every instance of witnessing involves a form of mediation, primarily the translation of an experience into language for the understanding of those absent. Conversely, every act of mediation incorporates a witnessing aspect, especially when technology serves as a substitute for an absent audience (Frosh & Pinchevski 2009).

The 'digital streets' explored by Gajjala are crucial to all three movements in complementing physical politics. As Gajjala (2019, 115) notes, digital activism embodies a dual nature, serving as both a citizen's media paradigm and a call-out culture. Success in this realm hinges on two key factors: the ability to tap into existing virtual communities and the cultivation of affective publics through interconnected emotions (Gajjala 2019, 116). In an era marked by NGO professionalisation and the increasing appropriation of social issues for corporate marketing, advocacy work has become fiercely competitive. The phenomenon of 'digital street activity' primarily involves the dissemination of information through retweets and circulation, often accompanied by expressions of outrage. This form of activism, characterised by hashtag activism labour, involves the tasks of circulation and curation, differing significantly from citi-

zen media and resembling more professional social media marketing strategies. Here, the dynamics of branding and visibility politics shape digital streets activism within an intensely competitive framework (Gajjala 2019, 117).

The role of social media is extremely central for the youth-led climate movement in India. I have discussed in Chapter 4 how media visibility partly replaces physical activism due to factors of gendered (im)mobilities, fear of repression and a depoliticised framing of the groups. Srijani Datta's (2024) meticulous study of 12 Indian climate action groups on Instagram revealed that, while most youth-led climate action groups adeptly communicate the climate crisis, they tend to underemphasise 'problem attribution' and 'injustice frames', thereby diminishing the political context. These groups face challenges in spotlighting the impact on marginalised communities, including young people and minorities, as observed by Datta (2024) in the discourse of FFF India. Moreover, the infrequent use of motivational framing suggests that collective actions primarily occur during Global Climate Strikes, reducing the necessity for content promoting sustained engagement. Against this backdrop, it is, perhaps, not so surprising that older Indian activists of local grassroots initiatives dismiss youth climate activism as a mere imitation of the European model. Drawing on my findings, I tend to disagree. Aside from young people's stronger embeddedness in global climate justice discourse, local initiatives – like the Save Aarey Movement in Mumbai or the 'No Means No' campaign in Kinnaur discussed by Negi and Werner (2023) – in particular have facilitated an alliance of activists that transcends age and gender and has brought together very diverse people. This adds complexity to the comprehension and theoretical framing of climate activism as primarily a 'youth movement'. However, the movement perceives itself as champions for the younger generation and their future aspirations.

Shared Memory and Cultural Heritage – Role Models and Utopias

By evoking images of 'indigenous' struggles towards a better future, contemporary protest movements produce a certain kind of nostalgia for India's socialist past as well as for historical movements against oppression and exploitation, in contrast to the undemocratic and repressive reality under the current Hindu nationalist regime. Repeatedly-referred-to historical repertoires and figures in Shaheen Bagh included the anti-colonial struggle, reformers in the educational sphere, and revolutionaries and defendants of Indian secularism. We thus find references ranging from 19th-century educator and social reformer Fathima Sheikh to B. R. Ambedkar, Bhagat Singh, and the Indian constitution as a symbol of secularism and democracy. Mahatma Gandhi is less referred to directly but more rhetorically in the adaption of the term *satyagraha* (non-violent

struggle). The climate movement additionally draws on influential socio-ecological movements such as the *Chipko Andolan* and the *Narmada Bachao Andolan.* In their social media discourse and dominant narratives, religious tropes are completely absent, even though earlier ecofeminist movements often activated religious metaphors and discourses. In addition to a historical repertoire similar to the protests in Shaheen Bagh, the Farmers' Movement included Sikh Gurus and warriors in the heroic lineage of the movement. In emphasising the important role of publications for a movement, Navkiran Natt also draws a connection between the Indian Farmers' Movement of 2020–2021 and the early 20th-century Ghadar Party, which revolved around a publication.

Navkiran Natt also contextualises the *Trolley Times* initiative within a nostalgic framework for traditional activism and print media, reminiscent of earlier socialist and unionist movements in the subcontinent. These movements were characterised by anti-capitalist ideals and a commitment to equality and secularism. In line with the notion of unity, numerous comments in *Trolley Times* reflected a deliberate choice to showcase peacefulness, solidarity and non-violence, aiming to present an exemplary model of coexistence. Through interviews and narratives within *Trolley Times,* participants depicted the protest sites as exceptional spaces, resembling almost utopian 'ideal towns' or 'ideal societies', contrasting with the perceived deterioration of Indian democracy.

In the Shaheen Bagh context, my knowledge co-producers made similar observations about the exemplary peacefulness and the strong spirit of community and solidarity. Comparable with the temporary settlements that the protesting farmers set up along the entry points to the Delhi capital region, Shaheen Bagh also consisted of a week-long sit-in with temporary infrastructure for sleeping, food preparation and childcare. In a way, the Farmers' Movement inherited this physical and ideological antithesis to a highly divided society split along the lines of religion, caste, gender and class from its immediate predecessors in Shaheen Bagh.

It is often the experience of the community 'on the ground' that undergoes a utopian articulation 'online'. When this happens, something that functions with bodies in close affective interaction (e.g. the protesting of peasants in their material organisation on the street) can become an ideological spectacle as soon as it enters the mediation of social media. For that reason, recent research has been concerned with the politics of invisibility (Schaflechner & Kramer 2024).[46] This applies in particular to actors from the non-middle class. In my three case studies, however, we can rather speak of a temporal simultaneity

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[46]   I particularly thank Max Kramer for this important comment.

and, thus, of hybrid media activism (Treré 2018), not simply of a successive 'translation' of physical experiences into digital mediation.

Witnessing and preserving historical records also serves as an active response to combat the appropriation of historical narratives by Hindutva forces. These forces attempt to rewrite India's history by erasing the narratives of minority and marginalised communities, thereby envisioning India as a Hindu nation. Through documenting and fostering solidarity, Ita Mehrotra and Prarthna Singh maintain a specific narrative of Shaheen Bagh. This narrative emphasises visual motifs of female empowerment and intergenerational and cross-community support and care while linking gender and resistance as mutually reinforcing elements. Their artistic endeavours and accompanying narratives bear witness to the possibility of alternative modes of coexistence marked by harmony and solidarity, thereby contributing to the creation of new artistic realms through their intervention.

Bridging Religion, Class and Gender

Rakopoulos (2016) defines solidarity as a concept that serves as a bridge, loosely capturing and yet maintaining tension between various practices, social forms and visions for the future. It connects disparate networks of individuals and communities, sometimes encompassing contradictory interpretations. This notion of solidarity as a 'bridge-concept' implies a perceived cohesion that transcends ideological, social and geographical boundaries. It therefore makes sense to ask how the movements under discussion negotiate relevant social constructs such as religion, caste, class and gender, and to what extent they succeed in bridging these differences.

In the discourse in and around *Trolley Times,* people often describe the Farmers' Movement as bringing communities of different religions and occupations together (i.e. farmers and workers), as being trans-regional as well as trans-ideological; and the significant involvement of women is emphasised. The mission statement of *Trolley Times* contains a recognition of existing differences and a vision of unity. A similar rhetoric is used to describe the composition of people that were engaged at Shaheen Bagh and in the anti-CAA/NRC struggle in general. While religion and caste were addressed as divisive factors and active attempts were made to either ignore or, ideally, bridge these differences, class seems to be the most difficult social category to navigate. For instance, Lerche (2021) remarks how class–caste alliances prevailed and partly prevented unity in the peasants' struggles.

I have mainly avoided using the term intersectionality to explore the overlapping identity markers that define belonging and exclusion. As one of my foci

was to highlight a gendered perspective on all three case studies and further illustrate and problematise the 'branding' of female activism, the intersections of gender and religion (Shaheen Bagh), gender and caste (Farmers' Movement), and gender and class (youth climate movement) stand out as striking. They refer, in a way, to an understanding of intersectionality in terms of the feminist idea of complicating the 'double or triple burden' of 'woman'. But, as Nivedita Menon (2015) has discussed in her critique of the concept, intersectionality does not capture the South Asian experience adequately. Most importantly, based on the assumption that the category 'woman' is not stable or homogeneous, caste, race and class are consequently not fixed categories either (Menon 2015, 37). In India, a subtracted understanding of 'woman' never prevailed, which had to be complicated by an intersectional approach. This identity of 'woman' was from the start located within the idea of the nation and within communities of different sorts (Menon 2015, 38). While Crenshaw (1989) originally conceptualised the term intersectionality within in a legal context, Menon argues that the law is most just when it does not recognise multiple identities. Identity categories do not exist 'naturally' but are constituted through political practice. Hence, we do not change their meaning through legal validation (Menon 2015, 40). 'Each identity emerges or rather, is called into being, in particular contexts in such a way that at that moment it is not simply an intersection of two or more identities but an unstable configuration that is more than the sum of its part' (Menon 2015, 40). She adds that the intersection itself is an empty space and not all identities are equally important at all times (Menon 2015, 43). This complexity is reflected in the shifting positionality of my knowledge co-producers in their interactions with the larger movements, with mainstream media and fractured digital publics, or with me as a researcher. It is not for me to decide at which moment which identity is more important. As the connecting theme of this book is solidarity, the 'bridging' and simultaneous recognition of diversity was my primary interest.

Contemporary climate movements have, perhaps, the greatest potential to actually bridge differences through their universalist and non-identitarian appeal. For the Indian context, I discussed how prominent youth activists are mostly female, middle-class and relatively privileged in terms of religion, caste and education. Studies on the worldwide 'Greta effect' have revealed how middleclassness offers identification in the sense of 'she is one of us'. The issue of class is one that was stressed by some young climate activists themselves, as it brings up questions of representation and positionality. A young activist from YFCI precisely talked about the 'gap' in the climate movement that prevents a unified struggle. This divide exists between the local struggles of rural groups, the lower classes, lower castes and Adivasis – some of whom have decades of experience in counter-hegemonic environmental organising – and the global

movements dominated by the urban middle class, such as Fridays For Future. Through the employment of an overall depoliticised framing, middle-class environmental activism is perceived as rather harmless and, thus, is tolerated by the middle-class parents of involved young people. The associated risk for already marginalised groups is, therefore, much higher. Furthermore, the promotion of seemingly apolitical activities is closely connected to gendered mobilities. Despite a feminised public image of global youth climate activism, the Indian reality presents barriers to women's participation due to mobility limitations and gendered power hierarchies within the movements.

These observations hold true for forms of activism that span an involvement over years, as found in youth-led groups of the contemporary Indian climate movement. Shaheen Bagh and the Farmers' Movement propagated a feminised public image as well, presenting women at the forefront of revolutions. In strong contrast, though, their framings are far from depoliticised. The gendered particularity of the Muslim women in Shaheen Bagh 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. In Shaheen Bagh, the strategic use of 'body politics' (Günther 2023) physically placed the protesters in a public space dominated by Hindu men, challenging Hindu patriarchal normative spatiality while protecting the men of their own marginalised community and resisting intra-communal patriarchal structures at the same time.

Caste, class, religion and gender dynamics are inherent in the perspectives and experiences of the artists and activists involved in this study, whom I refer to as knowledge co-producers. In the introduction, I have elaborated on my approach to research ethics and addressed issues related to my positionality as a white female researcher from the Global North. One aspect that facilitated access was my shared middle-class background with the majority of knowledge co-producers. Similarly, Prarthna Singh underscores the significance of collaborating with women from Shaheen Bagh deeply rooted in the social context that gave rise to this protest, given her own privileged caste and class background within Indian society. Most interview partners hailed from a middle-class background, residing in Indian metropolitan cities, and either pursued higher education or were graduates from esteemed Indian universities or institutions in Europe or the USA. I have commented on the exception of a single rural activist present at FFF's Global Climate Strike in Mumbai and pointed towards YFCI's efforts to broaden the scope beyond the urban centres and become more inclusionist (see Chapter 4). Despite a rather high level of personal involvement in this particular research, I was unable to directly engage with the majority of women who participated in the Shaheen Bagh protests or joined the farmers'

protest by driving tractors toward Delhi due to travel restrictions but also due to my own positionality. Instead, I relied on knowledge co-producers with similar class backgrounds to serve as intermediaries, providing access to knowledge beyond conventional academic, journalistic or 'global' narratives. It cannot, therefore, be ruled out that power asymmetries were perpetuated here as well.

In summary, the case studies explored in this book illuminate the diverse strategies employed in three recent Indian social and protest movements to foster solidarity. Through visual art and digital media, activists engage in self-mediation and bridge-building, aiming to counter mainstream narratives and cultivate collective memory.

The Farmers' Movement's *Trolley Times* newsletter exemplifies activist self-mediation, challenging dominant media narratives and fostering emotional connections among participants. Similarly, Ita Mehrotra's and Prarthna Singh's work highlight the importance of collaborating with individuals deeply rooted in specific social contexts to shape narratives authentically. Despite the challenges posed by caste, class and religious differences, movements like the Farmers' Movement and Shaheen Bagh demonstrate efforts to bridge social divides and draw inspiration from historical struggles against oppression. In the realm of climate activism, social media serves as a central platform for mobilisation and knowledge sharing, but challenges exist in effectively addressing political contexts and engaging marginalised communities.

Furthermore, the strategic use of 'body politics' and women's leadership in movements like Shaheen Bagh challenge patriarchal norms and contribute to reshaping political landscapes. In other words, women's bodies are the most radical tool of protest in public space, and all three movements draw or drew on iconic images of protesting women to render their demands visible and, thereby, connect to a global trend that spans the Arab Spring, the Iranian protest under the slogan of 'Jin, Jiyan, Azadi' (Kurdish: 'woman, life, freedom'), and iconic imagery of women confronting police forces in the Global North (Black Lives Matter, Occupy, Climate Movements, etc.).

Overall, these insights underscore the importance of collaboration, inclusivity and nuanced understandings of solidarity in driving meaningful change within any given society. Mediation is facilitated through various channels, but all three case studies provide insights into activist media labour that is antagonistic to the rampant variations of circulating propaganda and hate speech of what Fathima Nizaruddin has called the 'Hindutva ecosystem of hate' (Nizaruddin 2021). In the context of the RePLITO[47] project, we previously explored cir-

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47 See the Introduction or the website http://replito.de for more information on the RePLITO project.

culatory practices and contested spaces in India as dimensions of the main theme of living together (Schneider & Titzmann 2022). To conclude the three case studies presented in this book, I utilise the concept of circulation to shed light on the current situation in contemporary India. Against the backdrop of a competitive authoritarian regime, specific networks actively propagate divisive ideologies centred around identity, effectively marginalising certain segments of the population as outgroups. With the rapid dissemination of incendiary, sensationalist and polarising content, the existing channels of circulation, as evidenced in the social and protest movements discussed, also have the potential to generate various forms of alternative proliferation. These proliferations, in turn, offer pathways for fostering frameworks that promote solidarity and peaceful coexistence amidst societal tensions.