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## **Witnessing in Solidarity. Recording the Legacy of Shaheen Bagh through Visual Art**

Fritzi-Marie Titzmann

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### **Abstract**

This article delves into the transformative power of art and media in shaping narratives of solidarity and resistance within the context of the historic Shaheen Bagh protests that unfolded in New Delhi during the winter of 2019/20. These protests, sparked by the contentious Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), witnessed a unique convergence of Muslim women as protest leaders. The gendered perception of the Muslim minority in India was subsequently redefined. The movement also introduced innovative forms of feminist solidarity and non-violent protest strategies, including the use of digital tools for transnational outreach. The article spotlights the artistic endeavors of two young women artists who utilized their creative talents to bear witness to the events and craft testimonials for posterity. Prarthna Singh's photo book, *Har Shaam Shaheen Bagh* (2022), and Ita Mehrotra's graphic novel, *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* (2021), serve as case studies to investigate the processes of visually mediating the legacy of the Shaheen Bagh movement. Key aspects explored in this inquiry about witnessing and memory-making include the production and mediation of solidarity through art and media, the narratives conveyed by these visual works, prevalent visual tropes within works, the interplay of gender and resistance in their narratives, the new spaces opened up by these artistic interventions, and the positioning and framing of the artists themselves.

**Keywords:** Shaheen Bagh, solidarity, resistance, visual art, gender

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## Introduction

On December 15, 2019, residents of the neighborhood of Shaheen Bagh in New Delhi began an indefinite sit-in blockade on the Delhi-Noida highway. This followed the brutal police crackdown on peacefully protesting Jamia Millia University students. The ensuing 101 days of protest in the winter of 2019/20 against the new Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) were extraordinary in many ways. As documented by media reports and by a growing body of research literature, the movement featured Muslim women as protest leaders and thus contributed to a shift in the gendered perception of the Muslim minority in Indian and global media narratives (Bhatia & Gajjala 2020; Faisal 2020; Hashmi 2022; Kapoor 2022;). It also led to new forms of (feminist) solidarity and to the reappropriation of non-violent protest strategies (Bhatia 2021; Mitra 2023; Rai 2020; Sengupta 2021). These, in turn, made use of digital tools that facilitated the transnationalization of the movement (Basu 2021; Gajjala et al. 2023; Edwards et al. 2023; Edwards & Ford 2021). With its production of iconic images of students, veiled women, and grandmothers opposing a Hindu nationalist state apparatus, Shaheen Bagh became at once both a symbol of resistance and part of a counter-hegemonic national consciousness and memory for those who do not conform to the powerful Hindu nationalist political ideology in contemporary India.<sup>1</sup>

Art, especially street art and performances, came to be a distinct feature of the protest site. The art there was incorporated to communicate and build a collective identity (Ghosh 2020). Consequently, several artists took to documenting the events. This article introduces the works of two young women artists among the many who stood in solidarity on site. The two used their artistic capacities to bear witness and to produce testimonials for future generations. The question of how to remember and mediate the legacy of Shaheen Bhag is central for Prarthna Singh in her photo book *Har Shaam Shaheen Bagh* (2022) and for Ita Mehrotra in her graphic novel *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* (2021). 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. It tells a story in the style of a report that includes interviews and features the artist herself on her quest to document what transpired in Shaheen Bagh. By means of these two examples, this article investigates practices of recording and representing the legacy of the

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<sup>1</sup> I will not elaborate on the political background and timeline of the Shaheen Bagh protests as these are well documented elsewhere. For example, two detailed journalistic accounts were instantly published after the movement ended abruptly with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. See Mustafa (2020) and Salam (2020).

movement by examining the following questions: What is solidarity, and how can it be produced and mediated via art? Which narrative(s) of Shaheen Bhag do the respective works of Prarthna Singh and Ita Mehrotra communicate? What are the predominant visual tropes found in the two works? How do they link gender and resistance in their narratives? Which physical, affective, and discursive spaces are opened up by their artistic intervention? How do the artists position themselves vis-à-vis their subjects and frame their work?

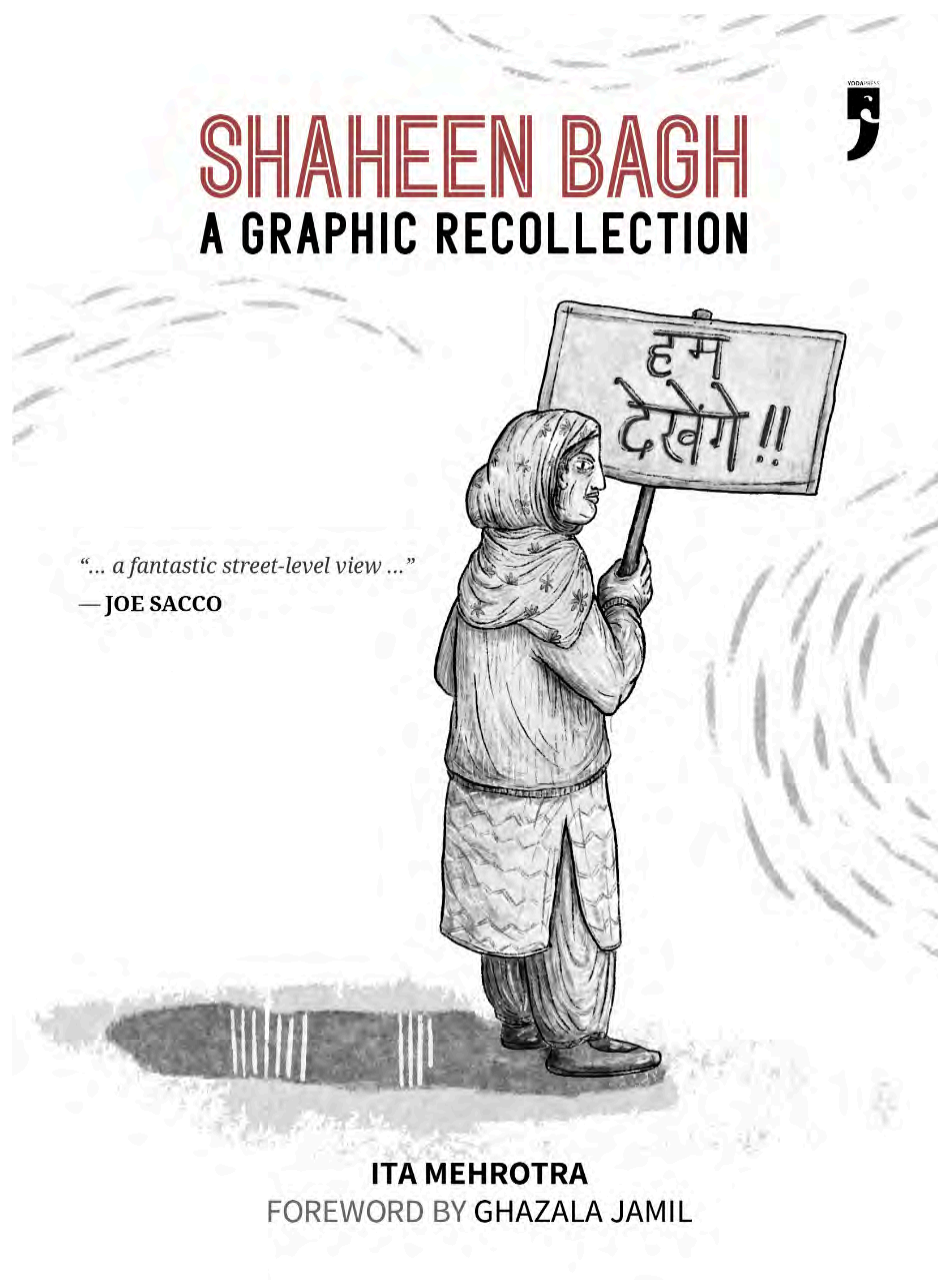


Figure 1: *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* by Ita Mehrotra (2021). ©Yoda Press



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

Methodologically, I carried out a visual and content analysis of the two works and conducted qualitative interviews with both artists (lasting about one hour each). These were enhanced by further in-person and email communication maintained in the process of furthering my analysis and writing.<sup>2</sup> With support of the software program MAXQDA,<sup>3</sup> I developed codes derived from my research questions and applied them in both the textual analysis of the interviews and in the visual analysis of the photographs and the graphic novel. I linked my own interpretation with the accounts offered by the artists and discussed those, while also consulting the existing research literature and considering central arguments contained therein.

### Theoretical pretext: Solidarity, art, and collective remembering in social movements

McGarry et al. (2020, 16) state that the “performing of solidarity is created through different voices being heard.” One way of making voices heard or protests seen is accomplished by means of protest aesthetics; these comprise the communicative,

<sup>2</sup> I especially want to thank Lara Kauter for her transcription of the interviews.

<sup>3</sup> MAXQDA is a software program designed for computer-assisted qualitative and mixed methods data, text, and multimedia analysis.

material, and performative culture of protests. These means of protest aesthetics create an alternative space for people to engage with politics (McGarry et al. 2020, 18f). In the past, mass media tended to shape almost exclusively the circulating representations of protest and protesters. In recent years, connected to the rise of social media and citizen journalism, the relevant research sought to shift its focus to the protesters themselves and, moreover, to how it is that they themselves document and produce their protest. This is done in a way that Cammaerts (2012, 125) terms “self-mediation” (see also: McGarry et al. 2020, 17; Bernárdez et al. 2019, Ahmed et al. 2017, Juris 2005, Dey 2018). Hence it enables more informed and widely circulated forms of “self-mediation.” In the context of Shaheen Bagh, traditional protest media, such as leaflets, were used alongside digital tools for mobilization and documentation. Several scholars have examined strategies employed in digital activism and transnationalization of the anti-CAA movement (Bhatia & Gajjala 2020; Edwards et al. 2021; Edwards & Ford 2021; Basu 2021).

One of the central media spaces of resistance is visual activism (McGarry et al. 2020, 27). Visual activism refers to the use of visual elements, such as images, art, and multimedia as a means of promoting social and political change. 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 language and “speak” about things that are not immediately visible. Writing specifically about the graphic narrative of protest, Salmi (2021) emphasizes that these narratives function as “intermedial texts”: “[I]t 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).

However, the two examples of the political artwork that emerged with the Shaheen Bagh protest movement at hand do feature textual components. The genre of the graphic novel usually combines text and images that together set the narrative. Unlike a conventional novel, the graphic storyline does not narrate everything in detail; certain passages remain purely visual. Singh’s photos appear without captions but are integrated into a larger multimedia project, which 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), adding text varying in length. Ita Mehrotra is also active on social media 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.



Figure 3: Instagram post by Ita Mehrotra during the ongoing protests in January 2020. Screenshot by author with permission by Ita Mehrotra.

Both productions are intended to make contributions toward shaping a collective memory of Shaheen Bagh. They were thoroughly and thoughtfully curated, embedded in the artists' narration of events, aesthetic choice, political and social position, as well as within the circulation of their media practices.

### Collective memory of protest

Wertsch and Roediger understand collective memory as a space of contestation for control over the understanding of the past (2008, 319). The authors consider it more appropriate to speak of a collective remembering, a constant process that is intertwined with the present and tied to identity projects. The process of memory-

making occurs quasi simultaneously with the relevant events aided by the affordances of new media. Protestors film and photograph what they see and then post this on social networking platforms, sometimes in real-time, thereby producing an ever-expanding archive of images of protest events and of related self-representations (Cammaerts 2012, 125).

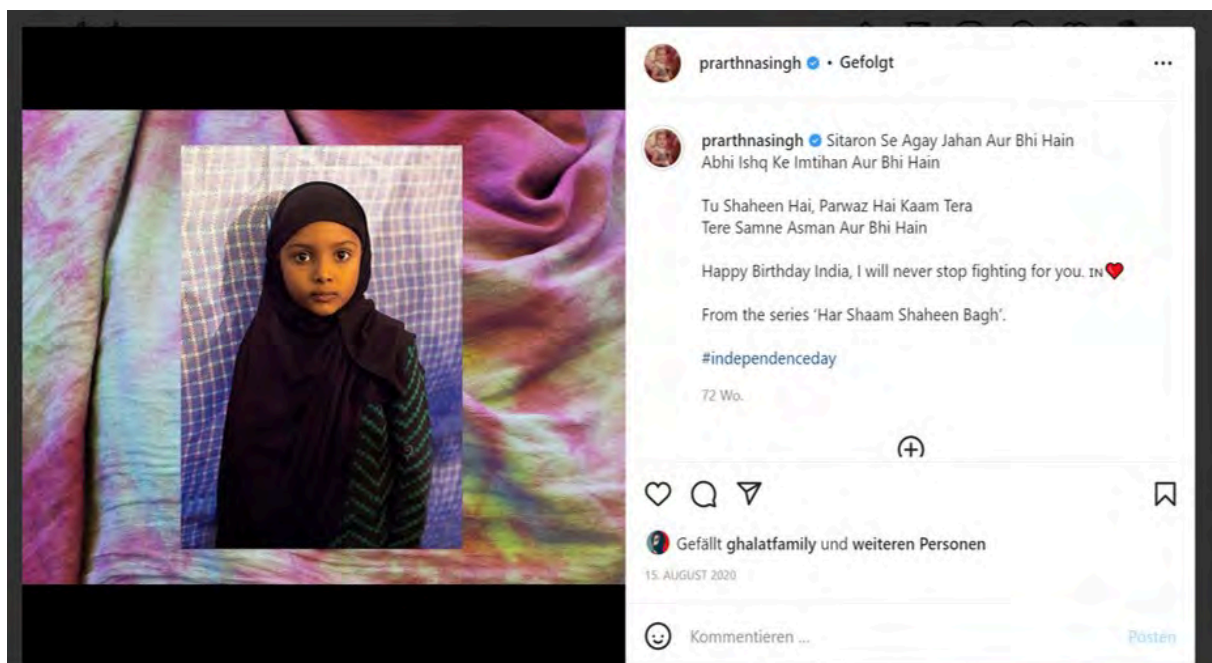


Figure 4: Instagram post by Prarthna Singh on Independence Day 2020, almost five months after the protest was dissolved. Screenshot by author with permission by Prarthna Singh.

In a recently edited volume, Merrill et al. (2020) examine the digital practices of social movements' memory work, focusing on curating, circulating, and claiming memories. Memory work refers to a process of exploring and reflecting on personal or collective memories, often with the aim of uncovering hidden or marginalized histories. In this context, the term "claiming" refers to a way of appropriating spaces—in particular digital—for suggesting counter-histories (Merrill et al. 2020, 17). The two artists discussed in this article engage in exactly these tactics, though not exclusively digital, of curating a living archive, circulating and also remediating a narrative that they would like to preserve as cultural memory. They are determined to shape the collective remembering with their own attempt to establish a counter version of the official state narrative about Shaheen Bagh.

### Protest and witnessing: Two women—two books

Selected photographs from Prarthna Singh’s photo series *Har Shaam Shaheen Bhag* were first published in the US-American photography magazine *Aperture* (summer 2021), where they appeared with an accompanying article by Kamayani Sharma. After some of her photos had circulated previously and repeatedly on Instagram, she herself finally published her photo book in 2022, in collaboration with the designers Sameer Kulavoor and Zeenat Kulavoor. It is a multi-media portrait with photographs, drawings, songs, letters, and other memorabilia.

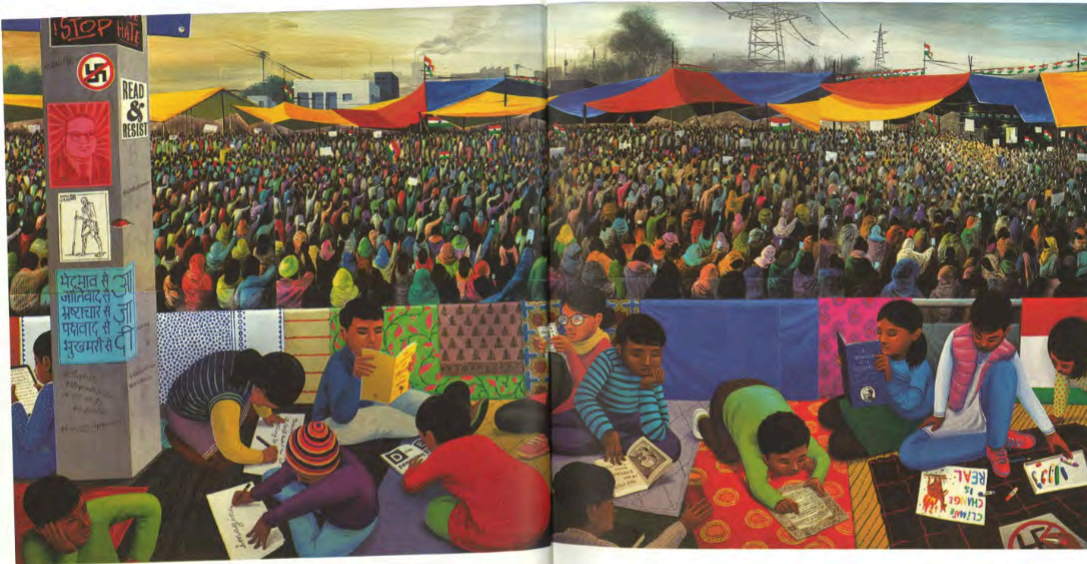


Figure 5: Drawing by Sameer Kulavoor titled “Read & Resist” (2020) in Singh (2022, 40-41). © Prarthna Singh

While portraits of women protesting are the core of Prarthna Singh’s series, the book also features a comprehensive appendix with English, Hindi, and Urdu translations and with further information on the movement. Upon its launch, the book received very positive reviews in the press, including in *The Indian Express* (Fernando 2022) and in the *British Journal of Photography* (Fletcher 2022). At one point, Singh describes her motivations as such:



*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 results from Singh's regular visits to the protest site and her interaction with the protesting women of all ages. Several women were involved in the book's creation by contributing their own writings or drawings.



Figure 6: Instagram story by Prarthna Singh: Book launch with the ladies of Shaheen Bagh, 2022. Screenshot by author with permission by Prarthna Singh.

As the book happened to be published during Ramadan 2022, Prarthna Singh, as seen in the company of this group of women, celebrated its launch with an *iftar*<sup>4</sup> in New Delhi. Forms of reciprocity are integral to Singh's work. The artist writes on the last pages of her book:

<sup>4</sup> The meal in which Muslims break their fast at sunset.

*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 onsite 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)*



Figure 7: Prarthna Singh with two girls holding the polaroid pictures that they took at the impromptu photo studio in Shaheen Bagh.  
From [harshaamshaheenbagh.com](http://harshaamshaheenbagh.com) © Prarthna Singh

She explained how, in the process of producing the photographs included in the book, she used different mediums; these range from a Polaroid, a disposable camera, a medium format film camera, and a digital camera to her iPhone: “I also had to be often not visible, because as soon as you have a 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). 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 corresponds to the processes of curation, circulation, and of claiming memories that Merrill et al. (2020) describe. This act also produces a counternarrative in the very sense that Cammaerts (2012) understands self-mediation. Second, the act of witnessing 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 tactics that cause symbolic provocation (Cammaerts 2012). While the book was still in progress, the project website explained:

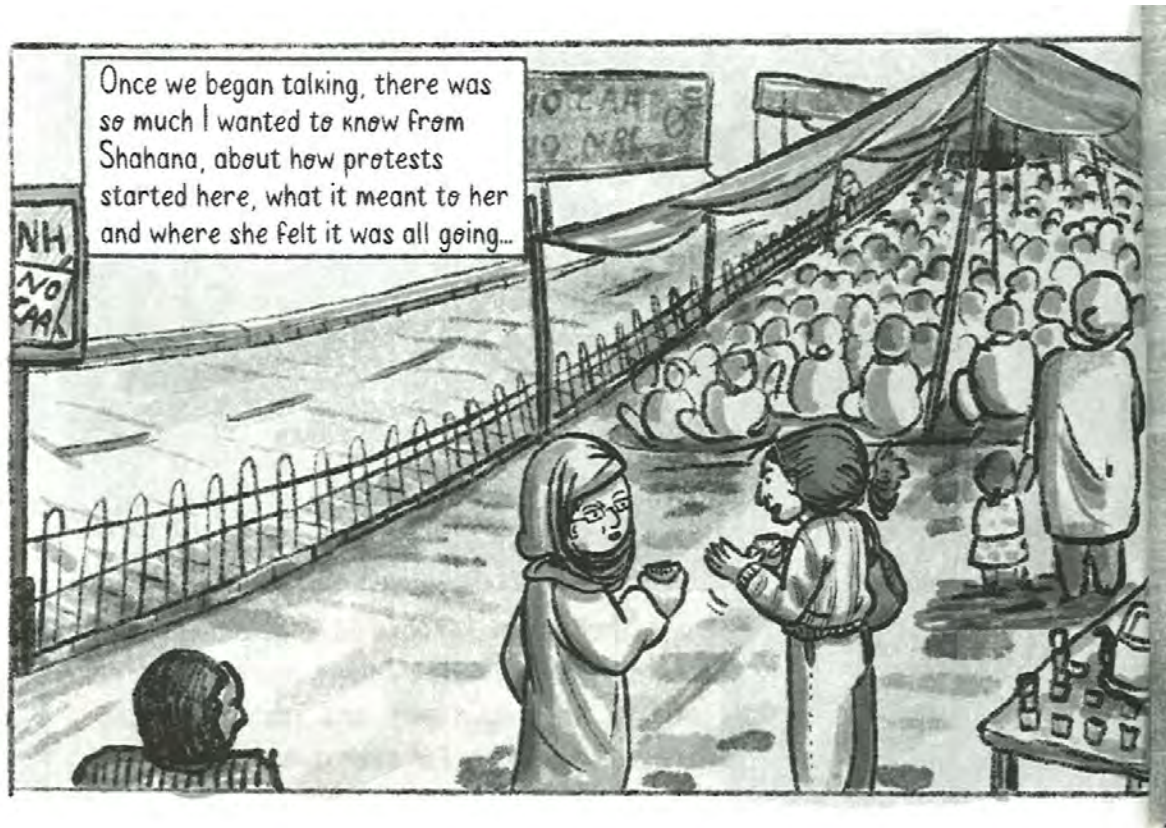
*This book will serve as evidence to the revolutionary spirit of the women of our country, an urgent and necessary document that celebrates the very core of our now endangered secular, democratic values. Two years in the making, our project is now in its final stages. Given today’s political climate, 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 was finally published by the independent Yoda Press in 2021. Her highly acclaimed graphic novel tells the story of the Muslim women who started the protest at Shaheen Bagh.<sup>5</sup> It is based on conversations, interviews, and drawings that the artist made during her own participation in the protest.

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<sup>5</sup> See reviews, i.e.: Raina (2022); Ht Weekend (2021); Khalid (2021).



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Figure 8: Beginning the conversation with Shahana  
(Mehrotra 2021, single image from a panel on p.16). ©Yoda Press

Mehrotra's book appears journalistic in its retelling of the story of the protest. Mitra refers to Salmi's (2021) conception of graphic novels as intermedial texts, (2023, 3) explaining 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." Mehrotra depicts strategies that produce affects of safety and emotional solidarity through sharing food, songs, and artwork. In her excellent analysis of those, Mitra (2023) explores the interplay between collectivity, mobilizing emotions, and political effectiveness in depth.

Ita Mehrotra situates herself in a feminist political trajectory. She does so via the graphic novel genre, which is new in the Indian art world, having emanated from Europe to become an elite subculture in India. Mehrotra classifies it as being both 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 comic 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 in using these social media platforms as radical art tools. Her act of illustrating the women's testimonies and conversations, like Singh's photographs, relates to the strategy of self-mediation. For it creates space for the voices of those who initiate, carry out, and represent a protest; it sustains a counter-narrative; and it follows—like Singh's work—a logic of bearing witness.

### **Telling a story of hope and solidarity: A contextualized visual analysis**

At the center of the visual imagery in both works are images of protesting women.

By foregrounding not only students but mothers, grandmothers, and children, the visual imagery emphasizes women of all ages as active agents. The gendered particularity of women in the act of leading a protest centered around the question of who can claim citizenship has additional symbolic value. For they are visible making politics in a way that counters structural processes that render women invisible and that fail to circulate 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>6</sup> There, women led the protests, before the names of only male leaders began appearing in history books. Both works intervene exactly at this juncture by making minority women visible and audible in their resistance and efforts to document the empowering dynamics of this historical moment. In her written introduction to Prarthna Singh's photo series in *Aperture*, Sharma observes the "reciprocal gaze" of Singh's photo subjects.

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<sup>6</sup> The Chipko Andolan (movement) of the 1970s and 1980s has presented 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.

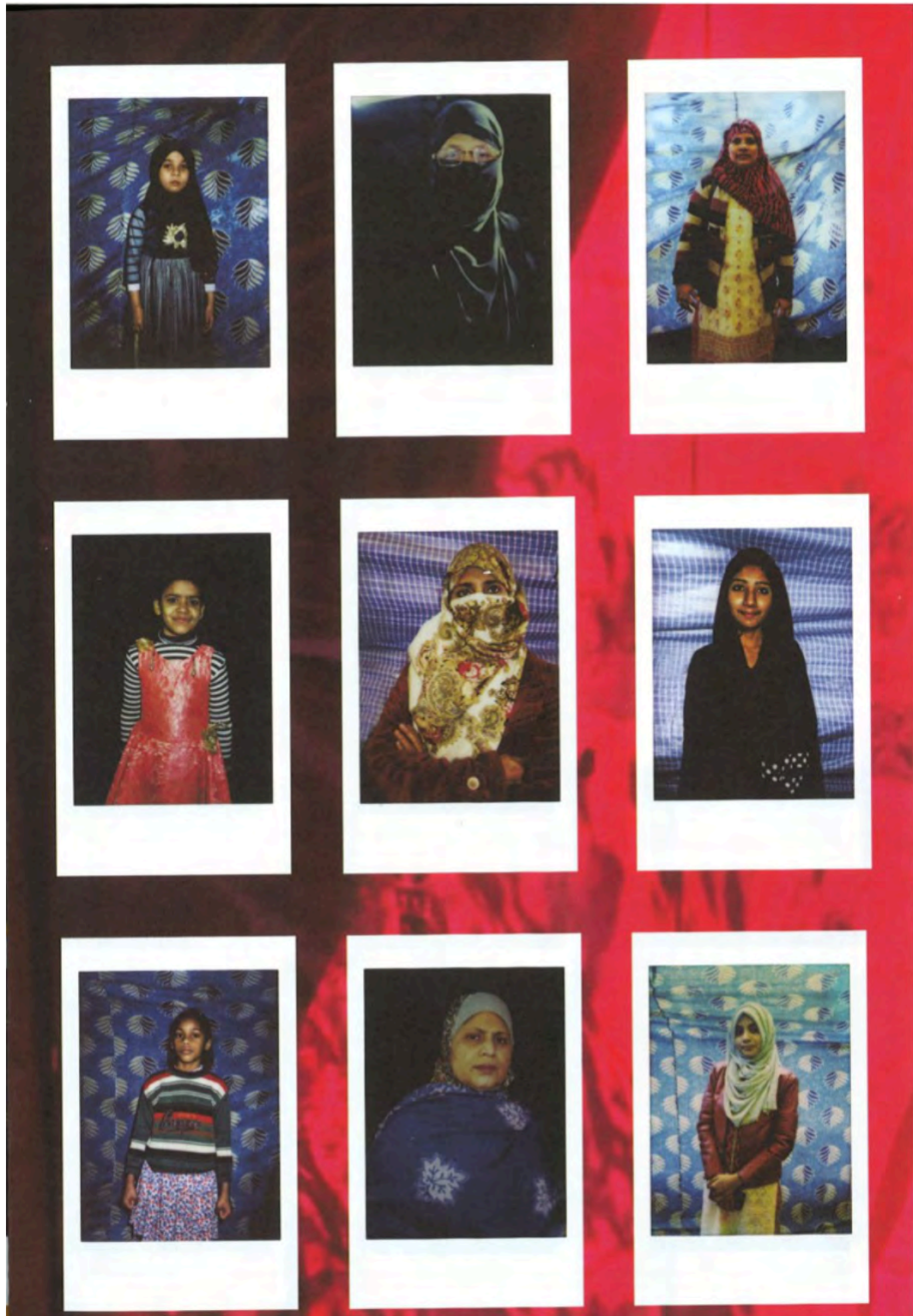


Figure 9: Polaroid images in Singh (2022, 26). © Prarthna Singh



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Figure 10: Discussing the evolution of muslim women's political agency in Mehrotra (2021, 106). ©Yoda Press

In both photographic and political terms, Sharma describes this gaze as being quite familiar, as one that is characteristic of average women. She adds that “Singh’s medium-shot compositions emphasize how radical is the very presence of these oft-marginalized, singular bodies on camera, and by extension, as a collective in the agora” (Sharma 2021, 126).



Figure 11: Singh (2022, 78-79). © Prarthna Singh

### Visualized solidarity

Mitra discusses what she calls “anti-individualistic tactics,” including hospitality, female bonding, confidentiality, defiance (of gender roles), empathy, love, and comradeship. She considers these as affects that are in circulation at the protest site and that are represented in Mehrotra’s graphic recollection (Mitra 2023, 4). Not only Mehrotra visualizes solidarity with the reference to sharing clothes, food, and responsibilities for providing care. In Singh’s portraits, too, the background of shawls used during the protest refers to the cold winter nights. For those posed an additional challenge to the perseverance of the protestors. But this background also suggests an ethics of care and reciprocal solidarity among the women protesters.





Figure 12 (left): Singh (2022, 13)  
© Prarthna Singh

Figure 13: Mehrotra (2021, 52-53)  
© Yoda Press



Mehrotra draws images of protesting masses and includes their accounts of how it was that 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 refer to as an “ethics of care.” These, they argue, are closely linked to certain practices of “organic” solidarity that is constituted through the sharing of food, care, and organizational responsibilities.

The protest strategy of mobilizing affects through food has its roots in the Sikh religious tradition of *langar*. In several of Mehrotra’s images, it is men who are depicted as preparing 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 recontextualizes *langar* in a unique expression of secularism. At the same time,” observes Mitra, “it challenges gender roles in both communities, underlining the importance of seeing Shaheen Bagh as a feminist radical social protest” (2023, 7). Rakopoulos (2016) described such strategies of mutual care as a re-contextualisation of village-hood in times of crisis.

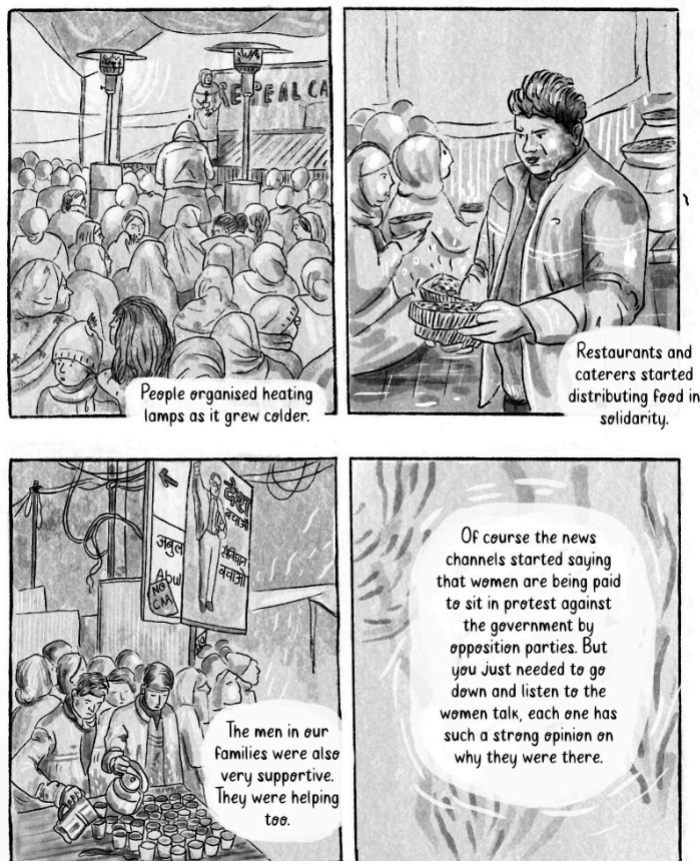


Figure 14: Practices of solidarity and resistance to counter attempts to malign the movement by government and mainstream media. In: Mehrotra (2021, 47). © Yoda Press

Understanding the ethics of care as a decisively female way of resistance brings with it some problematic connotations. Günther (2023) discusses how “body politics” have emerged as a gendered way of protesting against the background of patriarchal regulations of female bodies worldwide. Nevertheless, the emphasis on an ethics of care, i.e., on food-sharing, childcare, and organizing in female-led protests, speaks to an essentialized notion of femininity that is associated with these practices and that romanticizes 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 organization of their own community and their own gendered visibility and mobility in public space deserves special attention (Chopra and Sanyal 2023; Ray 2022; Bhatia 2021). 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 labeled as something that must be treated and policed by the state. By physically confronting state forces, 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 marginalized people. To be sure, the visibility of women in protest movements is not unique. However, the visibility of Muslim women in this particular scenario suggests a show of bravery and represents an attempt to counter global stereotypes of oppressed Muslim women whose men are easily viewed as being terrorists (Bhatia and Gajjala 2020, 6293).



Figure 15: Mehrotra (2021, 45). © Yoda Press

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Singh's work itself is a testimony of her own solidarity towards the women of Shaheen Bagh. And Mehrotra's graphic account includes several passages that deal with such expressions of solidarity from all over India and across communities, especially among different minorities (Mehrotra 2021, 83), often through the preparation and sharing of food (Mehrotra 2021, 60, 61). These and other forms of solidarity can be seen as opening up new physical and discursive spaces.



Figure 16: Singh (2022, 71).  
© Prarthna Singh

### 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 as 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 US!" (capitalized in original; 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 showing in her artistic process the self-expression of the women in Shaheen Bagh through acts of reciprocity. She also commits to sustaining these effects by maintaining new friendships and cooperation 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.

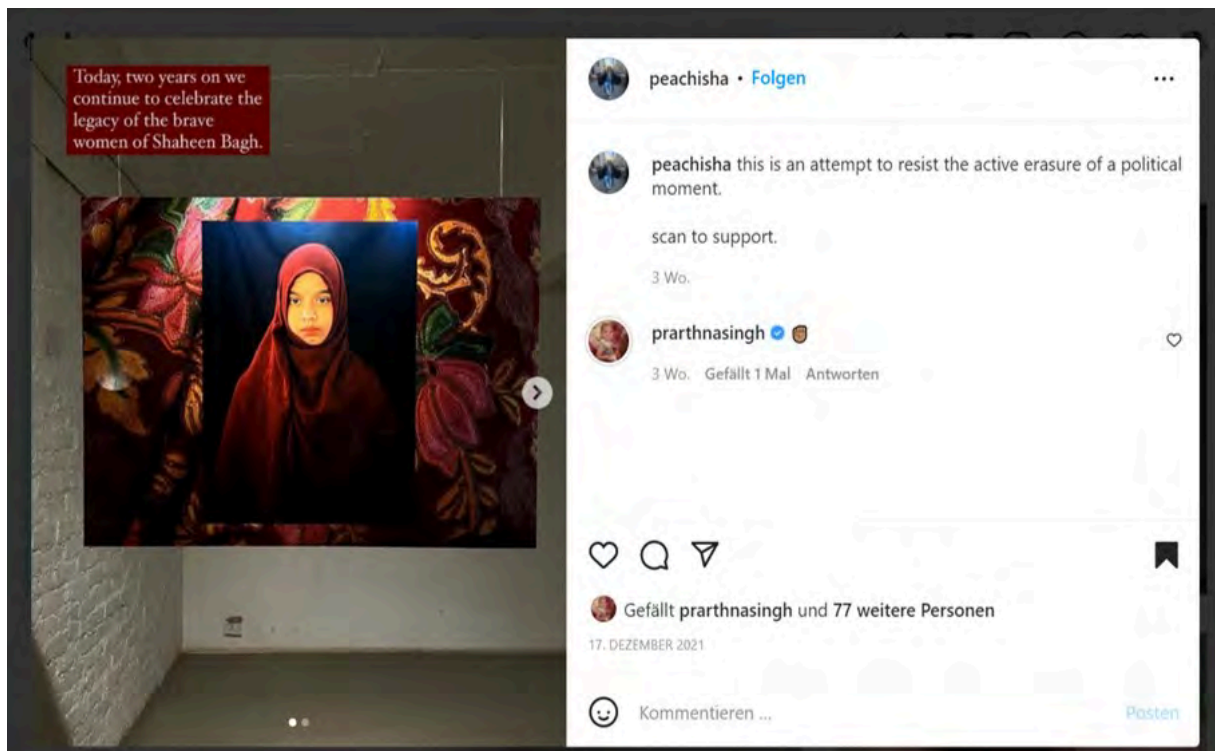


Figure 17: Pop-up display in Delhi of one portrait from Singh's series marking two years since the protest. Screenshot by author with permission by Prarthna Singh.

Circulation is one of the three key digital practices in the memory work of social movements, according to Merrill et al. (2020). It keeps the counter-narrative alive and visible. Circulation is also similar to that which Ita Mehrotra aims, for it contributes to creating space for the diverse voices of the protestors, to providing historical and political context to the multi-layered story of Shaheen Bagh, and to 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.<sup>7</sup>

The medium of comics and graphic narratives itself can be understood as opening up new spaces as well. Mehrotra added to Salmi's (2021) conceptualization of "intermedial texts" the appearance of blank spaces on pages of comics and graphic novels, where those represent an important aspect of the medium. They allow readers

<sup>7</sup> Book launch organized by The Rights Collective and Shalimar Books via Zoom, 23.02.2022.  
<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/shaheen-bagh-a-graphic-recollection-launch-discussion-tickets-265061444917>

to “enter the frames” and imagine what might have happened in between. She further stressed that many recent Indian comics on social media are personal narratives that would otherwise not appear as artwork.<sup>8</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). Thus, her book 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 amplify critical voices.

### **Positionality and framing: Towards conclusions**

A feminist-inspired notion of solidarity plays a central role both in artistic processes and in the artists’ framing. bell hooks (1986) defines sisterhood as political solidarity between women. In the Indian context, however, these “women” mostly turned out to be from the urban middle class, if not rich, and mainly English speaking. They thus represented and suppressed the voices of village women, poor women, Dalit women, Adivasi women, OBC women, and marginalized Muslim women who came from a political orientation that required the naming of one’s social location (Patil 2017). Both artists position themselves partly as outsiders owing to their privileged position in Indian society (i.e., to their not being a minority, and to their being educated and living in a good urban neighborhood). Despite the relatively low book price of INR 499 (\$6), Mehrotra is aware of the possible inaccessibility of her work to a wider audience, since it was published in English. The audience is therefore limited to a more educated, English-speaking class in India and to a global audience. A Hindi version is in progress and there are plans to publish the book in other regional languages to overcome these barriers. Given her privileged background, Singh emphasized the importance for her of the collaboration she experienced with women from Shaheen Bagh, who are firmly located in the the social context of this Muslim neighborhood.

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<sup>8</sup> For further examples of protest comics from India see: *Protest Art Around the World #4: India’s Protests and Web Comics*. Ruya Maps, 06.03.2020. (accessed 04.09.2023).

<https://www.ruyamaps.org/2protest-art/2020/2/13/protest-art-around-the-world-india>

Nevertheless, Singh and Mehrotra see themselves as part of a continuum of transnational female solidarity across communities, one that stands united against the current government and, beyond that, in a global resistance to 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 frontlines 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)). Similarly, Mitra observes that “Mehrotra’s graphic memoir participates in this feminist collective struggle [of nonviolent resistance] as a postcolonial narrative” (Mitra 2023, 13). In her introduction to Singh’s series, Sharma concludes: “Viewing these images is a sort of ‘being there’ too, it mimics the act of witnessing as a civic imperative (2021, 126). 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.”

To be sure, 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). One of the last images in Mehrotra’s book shows a woman knitting, as a symbol for weaving a narrative and creating memory.

In documenting and mediating solidarity by means of aesthetic witnessing, Ita Mehrotra and Prarthna Singh keep alive a particular narrative of Shaheen Bagh, which is represented through visual tropes of female agency, multigenerational and cross-community solidarity, and care. This narrative views gender and resistance as linked insofar as they can be observed as being mutually reinforcing. Their own respective visual art and the accompanying narratives testify that other ways of living together, i.e., in harmony and solidarity are possible, and contribute to an opening up of new spaces through artistic intervention.





Figure 18: Knitting as a symbol for memory creation (Mehrotra 2021, 104). © Yoda Press

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