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Unbearable Weight: Women and the Shaping of Political Subjects through the Politics of Corporeality

By Meenakshi Malhotra¹ and Krishna Menon²

Abstract

This article explores three moments in recent history where Indian women's bodies—seen and unseen—highlight the centrality of the female body in the changing political discourse of India. The first moment, the Shaheen Bagh moment, is characterized by the body marked as “Muslim woman” and her occupation of public squares and streets (the protests in 2019-20 against the Citizenship Amendment Act). The second moment is the female body that engaged in unprecedented care work while being subjected to heightened levels of violence in the times of the pandemic, and the third moment is the resilient female body in struggle against neo-liberal farm laws. The Muslim woman's body—culturally othered in numerous ways in South Asia and by the Indian state and its cultural representations—occupied center stage in a unique blend of volatility and performativity as women stepped outside their domestic spaces in order to stake their claim to a larger space at Shaheen Bagh in Delhi—that of home (“watan”) or country, even as they were threatened by the Citizenship Act and the NRC. Pushed back into their homes by the pandemic, they were put into enforced lockdown where their leader's call was to “stay home, stay safe,” which was deeply euphemistic and ironic given the levels of domestic violence that raged during the forced captivity. The article also shows how the year 2021 witnessed women at the border outside the Indian capital of Delhi, during the farmers' agitation, occupying spaces and organizing themselves into bodies of protest.

Keywords: Citizenship, Religious Minorities, India, Muslim Women, Citizenship Rights, Shaheen Bagh

Introduction

The article explores the idea of feminist biopolitics and seeks to unpack the semiotics of the female body in a discursive field of power constituted by various pulls and pressures. It looks at several instances in recent times when female bodies occupied public spaces and became the focus of the gaze, in urban and semi-urban contexts in and around Delhi. Given the tendency in South Asian societies to relegate women to the private sphere (and spaces), the occupying of public spaces by women takes on a unique significance and symbolic meaning. Postmodern and poststructuralist theorizations of the body often neglect its corporeality in

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favour of its cultural construction. Feminist theorists have, however, attempted to explore the issue of corporeality through a wide swath of theoretical, disciplinary, and cultural lenses. Feminist poststructuralists like Judith Butler (1990) and Susan Bordo (1993) accentuate the body's performativity, acts, and gestures, essentially taking their cue from the Foucauldian paradigm of the disciplined body. Luce Irigaray (1985) chooses "volume fluidity" to symbolise how women offer resistance against the masculine and patriarchal fantasy of the female body, and Julia Kristeva showcases the emanations, drives, and pulsations of a female body to address its materiality. Simultaneously, South Asian feminists like Ratna Kapoor, Kumari Jayawardena, Vandana Shiva, and Urvashi Butalia have also contributed to exploring the corporeal through the lenses of law, nationalism, environmentalism, and culture. In their analysis of postcolonial literature and history, law, society and the nation-state, the domestic sphere and family, ethnic and religious orientations, and sexualities, they have generated fresh perspectives on female agency and illustrated the insidious workings of patriarchy. To think of the body in South Asia is to locate it as it may be understood through the multiple and intersecting lenses of feminism, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, post-structuralism, and post-colonialism. The writing around the body that has appeared in the last few decades has enabled new theorization in the global South from the location of those who were once colonial subjects. The body in question here is not the biological body of biomedicine, but rather the lived, experiencing body situated in a field of intersecting discourses that frequently elude definition. It is located in specific social contexts and subject to ongoing debates and contestations. The study of the body from this vantage point can lend itself more easily to a variegated and complex understanding than a singular and unified one. Corporeality eludes fixed disciplinary grids since the body is located at the intersection and crossroads of many other identities and taxonomies. Much recent work bears testimony to the complexities of the body. This article focuses on the shaping of political subjects through the politics of corporeality.

Taking a cue from Judith Butler's argument about the performative effect of "public assemblies, that groups suddenly coming together in large numbers can be a source of hope as well as fear" (Butler, 2015), this article mines the "political potential" of some moments in recent Indian history when many women assembled together in public spaces. In exploring these, the article highlights the centrality of the female body and women's bodies in the changing political discourse of India. Butler suggests that

only that when bodies assemble on the street, in the square, or in other forms of public space (including virtual ones), they are exercising a plural and performative right to appear, one that asserts and instates the body in the midst of the political field, and which, in its expressive and signifying function, delivers a bodily demand for a more liveable set of economic, social, and political conditions no longer afflicted by induced forms of precarity. (Butler, 2015, p. 11).

By exercising their democratic right to protest, they acquire both agency and subjectivity.

While the notion of subject and subjectivity is debated in the social sciences, for this specific essay, the subject is someone who exists in the material world with his/her phenomenological and embodied side: the subject is not transcendental, universal, or meta-cultural (Rebughini, 2014, p. 1). While the article uses Foucauldian notions of biopolitics and governmentality, it resists the poststructuralist tendency to dematerialize but rather argues that it is important for feminist politics to (re)establish the importance of embodied subjectivity. The emphasis here is on the importance of the construction of resistant subjectivities based on everyday experience and corporeal practices, cultural consumption, rituals, and subcultures—which form the field in which alternative and hybrid subjectivities are performed (Hall, 1997).

The Shaheen Bagh protest—the protests in 2019-20 against the Citizenship Amendment Act³—was one such field/moment (in a spatio-temporal matrix), which was characterized by the gathering of the excluded bodies of Muslim women and their occupation of public squares and street. The second context and moment was the female body that engaged in unprecedented care work, the body that was subjected to violence and forced internal migration in the times of the pandemic. The third moment was of the resilient female body in struggle against neo-liberal farm laws. Even as we write this article, a fourth moment is already unfolding—the veiled or unveiled Muslim woman, as is evident from the majoritarian and misogynistic conflicts around the practice of veiling.⁴ These moments, studied together, are germane to the central argument of this article.

The last two years, which constitute a unique moment in world history, found people held hostage to a virus. It afforded us instances of a unique biopolitics shaped and moulded by various governments and governmentalities. However, even while the pandemic was at its raging worst with the first, second, and third waves, certain critical events were unfolding, even erupting, in urban cityscapes and at their borders and boundaries, especially in India. Even though these things caused the state to step in on several levels, it was the bodies of women, both seen and unseen, that were most visible and felt. These bodies played important roles as women tried to deal with a patriarchal and authoritarian state by being there and in large numbers. Women were pushed back into their homes by the pandemic, into enforced lockdown where the leader's call was to “stay home, stay safe,” which was deeply euphemistic and ironic given the levels of domestic violence that raged during the pandemic. In captivity, women had to bear the brunt of domestic labour and meet the care-giving requirements of the household. In South Asia, the gendered dimension of COVID was evident in the deepening of pre-existing vulnerabilities, loss of employment, poor access to educational and health facilities, and increased violence towards women and gender minorities. During the farmers' agitation in India in 2021, women at the border outside of the capital city of Delhi took over spaces and formed bodies of protest.

Methodology

The article uses a wide range of methodologies, which could be described as heterodox and diverse. It undertakes a detailed study which, in its mass of details, imbues the everyday, the contingent, with historical significance. It refuses a neatly packaged theory where the random, the incidental, is made to ‘fit’ in. Unlike knowledge, which foregrounds itself as neutral, objective, and believes itself to be a view from nowhere, this is a mode of scholarship and research which is invested in and interested in embodied, everyday experience. It interrogates both Cartesian dualism and the “flight to objectivity” (Bordo, 1987; Karmakar 2021, p. 1). Further, it refers to digital material—poetry, music, and theatre—to explore three moments from recent history. In drawing from the quotidian and other artistic and literary sources, the article attests to its belief in alternative epistemologies and feminist futures, which envision and gesture towards a different order of things. This reflects the way poems and music resonated among protesting groups that led to the forging of collectivities in the crucible of political struggle. In showing the emergence of the female voice and body in public spaces, the article adopts a transdisciplinary and innovative approach that attempts to move seamlessly between the humanities and social sciences on the one hand, and conventional texts and digital resources on the other. While doing so, the focus has been to recover the feelings and experiences of the body and the prevailing mood and emotions that energized these significant

³ The CAA bill proposal elicited mass protests by Muslim women who occupied public spaces like Shaheen Bagh for 87 days.

⁴ The “hijab row” was seen as a violation of a right since the Indian Constitution guarantees its citizens the freedom to practise their religion.

and life-altering instances. It is interdisciplinary in its approach because the article seeks to establish intersections between performed protest and politics, as seen in the poetry, songs, and performances used by women in India over the last two years to bolster their unprecedented political participation.

It is pertinent to remark here that this article, written during the pandemic, is framed by digital resources and the internet in a very specific way. Many people in the global south who have access to the internet have seen their lives—work, leisure, and politics—shift to the internet in a significant way during recent times. It remains to be seen what the impact of this shift might be on old-style politics, where bodies worked and struggled together in close proximity. The methodology acknowledges yet another important facet, that of women in India engaging with cyberspace with agency and freedom as they appropriate the resources of cyberspace (which is often experienced as a space of threat for women) for the purpose of collective mobilization.

Violence and Violated Bodies

Many subcontinental people and Indians, by dint of their specific subject location, are familiar with the mythological story of Sati's fragmented body parts. Sati, a beautiful young princess, was unable to accept her father Daksha's humiliation of her husband, Shiva, the Hindu God of destruction and regeneration, so she jumped into the ritual fire. Her lifeless body sent Shiva into a paroxysm of rage and he commenced a frenzied dance of destruction with her dead body, and wherever her dismembered body parts fell, a shrine sprung up. The story/narrative is not about Sati alone, nor is it the story of all women in South Asia. Nonetheless, this powerful narrative seeps into the cracks and crevices of our collective (un)consciousness as a trope and as an image. Nor does it just rest there. It recurs, eerily and not infrequently, in narratives of rape, humiliation, mutilation, and torture. It recurs in real-life stories of partition violence, where sometimes the family patriarch decides to save the honour of the family by sacrificing the life of a mother, sister, wife, or daughter (Butalia, 1998). It reappears in narratives of gruesome rapes and murders, which occupy disproportionate space in the media in a way that luridly foregrounds the misogyny and structural violence in South Asian society. Thus, the symbolic and emotive power of the female anatomy (there are shrines to Sati's various fifty-two dismembered body parts all over India) is a forerunner of contemporary "anatomopolitics" intersected by caste, ability, religion, and so on. Anatomopolitics here means the politics of the human body or a form of biopower that attempts to discipline the body. It could also be conceptualised as the disciplinary aspect of biopower, a technology of power to manage large groups. In a lot of ways, gendered bodies seem to be getting more attention in modern India. Even though women are aware of being sites and targets of structural and targeted violence, we can also see that they have remade themselves as bodies that resist, even though they are in the middle of a fight against multiple patriarchies and an unjust nation state.

Patriarchy allocates distinct spaces to women. It had traditionally designated the inner spaces for its women. This home space belongs to women, but the line that separates it from the rest of the house also acts as a boundary. The "Lakshman Rekha" from the epic Ramayana is a good example of this. It demarcates a line of control between respectability and ignominy, between upholding norms and transgressing them. When women overstep their boundary limits, their transgressions are seen as threatening the verities, taxonomies, and assumptions on which patriarchy is based. In order to understand the conditions under which docile and disciplined bodies become volatile and performative, the article dips into regional Indian literature, particularly focusing on a short story by Mahashweta Devi. The potential of individuals and collectives to offer resistance has been explored by many writers, particularly by writers like Mahashweta Devi. In many of her stories, like "Draupadi," "Breast Giver" (Stanadayini), and "The Hunt" (1997), Mahashweta Devi explores the nuances of the

relationship between women and violence. She explores situations where women weaponize their bodies to turn their wrath against an insensitive and violent state and its agents and representatives. Mahashweta Devi's story "Draupadi" illustrates a shift in the semiotics and symbolism of the female body where violence could boomerang and scar the perpetrator. In "Draupadi," the story of Dopdi Mejhen, the narrative is apparently from the perspective of the Senanayak, yet manages to convey the limitations of his vision and purpose. Draupadi's body gets "framed" in a particular way by the end of the narrative, and the full import of that is conveyed in terms of its impact on the Senanayak, who is ultimately "terribly afraid" of the spectacle of the naked woman approaching him. Dopdi's unexpected response to her gang rape and to the violence meted out to her re-constitutes the body as the site of not only attributed shame, but also a sign of resistance and rebellion. Dopdi's response also signals her refusal to participate, in a sign system imposed by the symbolic order, a semiotic code that she resists and re-interprets.

It is tempting to see the naked body and the senanayak's sense of primal terror at the spectacle of a naked woman in terms of the concept of abjection, as theorised by Julia Kristeva (Kristeva, 1982). As Kristeva explains, the abject "draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2). The abject has to do with "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 1982, p. 4) and, so, can also include crimes like Auschwitz. Such crimes are abject precisely because they draw attention to the "fragility of the law" (1982, p. 4). The rapidly advancing body of the torn, naked tribal woman Draupadi is a moment of primal terror where Senanayak's civilization and all his linguistic constructs fail. The marginalized body of the "other" threatens to engulf all the subject-object distinctions that Senanayak had erected. Seen by the red eyes of Draupadi, all the props that the Senanayak has constructed as the basis of his identity dissolve and desert him, and he experiences a moment of terror. The female body is often constituted as a docile body, a receptacle of male expectations, a body that is "done to" by governments and governmentalities that seek to "discipline" the bodies of women by regulating and prescribing attire, codes of conduct, and behaviour. The constitutive power of patriarchies is being challenged by the bodies of women, which have become sites for resistance and protest. When we look at how much this opposition as a whole weighs, Grosz's words seem especially apt. Bodies are volatile because "they act and react, function productively and interactively and generate what is unpredictable, new and surprising." Further, "because of their mobility and changeability, racially, sexually and culturally dominated female bodies resist the ethics and aesthetics of power structures" (Grosz, 1994, p. xiii).

Even as the female body became the site of many kinds of violence—whether of multiple patriarchies, of governments and governmentalities, or domestic or intimate partner violence—exacerbated by the pandemic, the article proposes that bodies at this juncture acquired a unique salience and significance, both semiotically and semantically. This article is a preliminary examination of three crucial moments in recent Indian politics wherein we witness the forging of a unique corporeal politics of feminist collectivism, activism, and resistance that provided more than a glimmer of hope not only for the present but also acted as a clarion call for future struggles. We argue that faced with a violent and vicious majoritarian agenda, steeped in pseudo-science and hyper nationalism and attempts to retrieve "lost masculinity" (financed by crony capitalists and a section of the cheerleader diaspora), women's collective actions and women's bodies in public protest are rather like the naked Draupadi challenging the Indian state/senanayak. In many instances of women's activism, the expressive body often becomes the site of violence, manifesting as it does a resistance to the forces of power, as for instance, the "naked protest" by a group of mothers in the Indian state of Manipur against the rape and killing of a young woman by the armed forces (Misri, 2011). Bodies, especially women's bodies, continue to be a concern within the public discourse on several

occasions in the past decade, for instance, the disdainful reference by a parliament member to women with short hair who would corner political offices in case of reservation of seats for women in the legislature (Kumar, 2017). In another instance, menstruating women's bodies were at the centre of the debates around the question of women's entry into the Sabari Mala Temple in Kerala (Menon, 2016).

Body Politics and the Body Politic

1. *Occupying Bodies, Voicing Citizenship*

In this segment, the literary and creative worlds are explored in order to evoke the mood of resilience and strength women in India have displayed in the three moments that are explored in this article. The almost heady and exciting days of the historic sit-ins staged by the largely Muslim women of Shaheen Bagh, Delhi, resulted in art, music, and poetry that attempted to record, reflect, and resonate with the mood. The popular stand-up comedian Varun Grover (2019) wrote a poem called “Kagaz nahi dikhayenge,” which literally means “we will not show the papers.” The poem was widely read as a sign that women would not accept what they saw as an unfair demand that they show proof of citizenship. The Muslim woman's body—culturally othered in numerous ways in South Asia and by the Indian state and its cultural representations—occupied centre stage in a unique blend of volatility and performativity as they stepped outside their domestic spaces in order to stake their claim to a larger space at Shaheen Bagh in Delhi, that of their homeland India, even as they were threatened by the amendments to the Citizenship Act and the National Registry of Citizenship (Thapar, 2021). The act, it is feared, would create insidious linkages between citizenship and religious identity, thus carrying within it the potential to disenfranchise millions of Muslims and other religious minorities in India. The closing weeks of 2019 were witness to the bodies of women—mostly Muslim women in India—who occupied public roads and squares across Indian cities, in opposition to the proposed Citizenship Amendment Act and the National Registry of Citizens (NRC). The Shaheen Bagh sit-ins in Delhi (December 2019) and the subsequent communal riots in North East Delhi had already brought the body into focus (Mustafa, 2020) before the pandemic escalated and exacerbated risk factors, requiring macro-political interventions to secure the health of the body and body politic. The resistance to the CAA by the predominantly Muslim women of Shaheen Bagh, often associated with the idea of veiling and a location within the sphere of domesticity, broke the many stereotypes through which they have usually been described (Anand, 2020). The women occupying Shaheen Bagh in Delhi braved the bitter cold and brought their household chores and children along to the venue, thus challenging the usual binary between the private and the public. Prepping for the evening meal, feeding the infants and other such activities that address the body were unabashedly and effortlessly carried out in the public protest by women who were considered in need of rescuing from “their men” by the Hindu nationalist government in power. The venue became a bustling meeting point for all those who were stifled by the autocratic regime, and a festive air marked by poetry, art, and performance gave it a unique character. The women carried out a performance of protest which took the form of art and poetry, songs, and performances of protest, solidarity, and community. A powerful and popular song was Faiz Ahmed Faiz's ‘*Hum Dekhenge*’ (We shall provide Witnesses)—a popular song of protest in Pakistan and India that succeeds in unnerving the powerful and mighty (The Wire 2020).

The song is a powerful testament to the idea of witnessing and expresses the belief that “mountains of tyranny will blow away like cotton.” It is a testimony to the power of the oppressed to be the authentic witnesses of truth—and, by implication, the truths of

history. Women's group performances at Shaheen Bagh demonstrated the invocatory power of the body and the energies transferred from one woman to another. Witness the energetic performance by *Zenana ka Zamana* (Zamana, 2020). The Indian national anthem was often sung with great gusto at the gatherings in Shaheen Bagh, rather reminiscent of the undocumented people in Los Angeles who took to the streets to sing the American National Anthem in Spanish in 2006. When so-called illegal aliens, who are "supposed" to be in the dark, appropriate a public space, especially in an "illegal public demonstration" to sing "America's" National Anthem in Spanish, they enact multiple contradictions that interject conflicting ruptures within notions of public/private, legal/illegal, self/other, and national/non-national "ownerships." "Muslims in the Hindu nationalist understanding have suspect loyalty towards the Indian nation." In singing the national anthem in the public sit-in, waving the Indian flag, while also nursing babies, these Muslim women confounded and demolished many of the stereotypes (Quint, 2020). It goes without saying that collective iterations of such performances add power and resonance (Butler, 2011).

These events, starting at Shaheen Bagh, proved to be a turning point in the political image of Muslim women, considered to be cloistered by oppressive Muslim patriarchy. They came out as their own leaders with an agenda that was much larger than themselves—that of the defence of democracy in India, the defence of plurality in India, and the defence of the Indian Constitution. In doing so, they destabilized the old binary of the modern, empowered, politically active woman versus the traditional woman. Like the Senanayak in Mahashweta's story, the sight of so many confident, articulate yet traditional Muslim women' bodies holding their own against a vitriolic media campaign that suggested that these women were "prostituting" themselves in the political arena was met with a quiet dignity and commitment to the cause. In this context, Muslim women's bodies are subjected to unspeakable sexual violence during religion-based conflicts (Nussbaum, 2006), or projected as in need of rescue from their men, an action undertaken supposedly by the Indian State under the current Prime Minister by banning Triple Talaq (Menon, 2018). Yet everyday Islamophobia is ignored, resulting in violence against Muslim women in the form of micro aggressions, intimidation, and violence. Legislation such as the one prohibiting the practice of Triple Talaq have the negative effect of criminalizing the Muslim man, further entrenching India's Muslim minority. The scenes of unruly and intimidating groups of men chasing young hijab-wearing female students expose the hollow claims of the Indian state's being a "protector" of Muslim women. Would this Muslim woman be allowed to cover her body as she deems fit? The courts are hearing the matter while we write this article (Mariam, 2022).

2. *Who Cared for the Women? Work and Violence during the Pandemic*

The COVID-19 pandemic in India revealed the deep inequalities in society while also drawing attention to the resolute care and nursing work performed by thousands of paramedical, nursing, and primary health care workers, the bulk of whom are women. During the pandemic, the body and mind required care; the living and the dead required care; and it was the women of rural India, towns, and cities who carried the burden of this care work, even while trudging long distances on foot or as families sought shelter. The violence within the home exposed the gendered limits of the claim "stay home, stay safe" (Sen, 2020). The pandemic rendered the most basic life events such as birth and death complex and difficult to deal with. The death of thousands during the deadly second wave of the pandemic in India has been captured by the poem written in Gujarati by Parul Khakhar, which weaves in themes of pandemic deaths, bodies floating in the Ganga, a river considered sacred to Hindus, with maladministration and violence, both structural and episodic. The tone is mocking as the poet refers to the insensitive and despotic attitude of the king/emperor in a utopic state (Ram-Rajya in Hindi refers to the ideal state) who is completely impervious to the suffering of his subjects.

The poem is both a cry of protest and a cry for help. Many poems and songs attest to the relentless pressure of care work and housework on women during the pandemic. The women at Shaheen Bagh and other venues were suddenly pushed back into the supposed safety of their homes by the COVID-19 global pandemic in March 2020 when the government of India suddenly announced one of the most totalizing lockdowns in the world. The pandemic has highlighted the enormous degree of care that the human body requires, provided mostly by women within the household and female healthcare workers in both the informal and formal sectors.

The biological body has been thrown into focus in a very specific way since the winter of 2019-2020 because of the pandemic, an unprecedented event that has thrown the dynamics of bodies and issues of touch into relief in a social context where touching certain bodies was already proscribed on grounds of caste-based purity and pollution norms. The forms, forces, and incidences of domestic violence are rooted in local power relations and unique cultural practices. The pandemic, instead of being a leveller, has actually become a revealer of inequalities and injustices and has created new inequalities, while reinforcing existing ones, as suggested by Judith Butler when she says that the pandemic is an emergency in and of itself, but it also aggravate the capital, concern, ethnic background, and climatological catastrophes that already existed. If humans wish to mend the entire planet, they should free it from the free market system that stands to profit from its dispersion of existence and death (Butler, 2020; Ackerely et al., 2020).

The precarity of lives and livelihoods and the psychosocial anxieties enveloping people as a result of the pandemic have created vulnerabilities and fear, making it a rife terrain for violence. It is rather ironic that while violence is rather ubiquitous, it is also unspeakable, especially violence experienced by women in societies such as India. In recent times, Slavoj Žižek's searing analysis of violence has enabled us to make nuanced distinctions between subjective and objective violence (Žižek, 2008). Subjective violence is the immediate physical or physiological experience of violence that is carried out by a clearly identifiable agent or institution. Objective violence is divided by Žižek into symbolic and systemic varieties. Symbolic violence refers to hate speech, and the various hierarchies inscribed into daily language (of gender, for instance). Systemic violence refers to the inequalities and disadvantages that are almost written into the successful functioning of the economic and political systems. Violence manifests itself in many forms: obvious and overt forms that are brutal, and the more insidious and everyday forms of violence that normalize things such as lack of access to effective Covid-19 testing facilities, WASH protocol, safe quarantine facilities, and well-equipped treatment centers for Covid-19. The everyday character of violence contributes to its normalization and makes society tolerant of it. Challenges of great magnitude, such as public health emergencies like Ebola or Zika, are known to have aggravated the daily struggles of communities, especially women, with the scourge of domestic violence. Evidence from past epidemics indicates the importance of a "twin track" approach that combines a response to the pandemic with an effort to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls. The "epidemic" of rape and violence against women that unfolded when the Ebola outbreak hit West Africa, was largely undocumented and treated as collateral damage (Peterman et al, 2020). Of the many manifestations, domestic violence abuse directed at women during the pandemic has received a great deal of attention. Domestic violence abuse (DVA) refers to an incident or pattern of incidents that direct control, coercion, or threats, violence or abuse in intimate relationships (of people above the age of 16) regardless of gender and orientation. Such abuse could be of a psychological, physical, sexual, economic, or emotional nature. DVA is a global public health issue and a human rights issue that has severe material and financial consequences (Taha, 2020). The pandemic brought with it another deadly and constant danger—the danger of the shadow pandemic of violence against women.

3. *If the Dead Bodies Could Speak*

The pandemic in India resulted in yet another form of violence on the body—this time on the dead body. Long lines for cremation, unclaimed bodies in hospitals, mass cremation due to a shortage of wood and furtive burials by the riverside were among some of the challenges that people faced while bidding a final farewell to loved ones who died due to the virus (“Covid: Shortages of...”, 2021). In the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, there were heart-wrenching and horrifying scenes of corpses floating on the sand beds of the “holy” river Ganga. These dead bodies have almost come back to haunt electoral politics in a state where emotions, religion, and violence go hand in hand. In fact, many hard-hitting songs have been written about the floating corpses and other such tragedies in Uttar Pradesh.

4. *When the Bodies Walked*

Pandemic-related lockdowns and the virus have destroyed families all over the world, but in India, they resulted in a tragedy of epic proportions when thousands of workers who service India’s burgeoning urban centers were forced out of their jobs and homes and forced to walk thousands of kilometers back to their villages. Calloused feet, hunger, thirst, disease, and fear characterized this trek. While some bodies were safely ensconced in the comfort of their homes, others walked in search of food and safety, fleeing the virus. Songs of hope and despair have been curated by scholars and musicologists. A song (Sreerekha 2020) in Telugu, for instance, records the long and painful journeys undertaken by ordinary workers—men, women, and children—to keep their bodies safe, ironically subjecting their bodies to severe challenges caused by lack of food and long stretches of walking since all transport options were suddenly withdrawn by the government as a part of the lockdown.

5. *Women as Sites and Agents of Protest*

In 2021, another part of women’s bodies was used as a symbol of resistance and a challenge to the government of India’s neoliberal farm policies. This showed how powerful women’s bodies can be. The women who were an active part of the yearlong blockades surrounding Delhi, the capital of India, established in clear and certain terms the return of the body in public protests even within an increasingly virtual world. The large presence of women farmers at protests at Singhu, Tikri, and, lately, the Ghazipur borders of Delhi against the three new agriculture laws, marked a significant moment in the continuum of women’s political mobilisation in the country. The presence of women has compelled the media, policy makers, economists, and the government to re-think their understanding of gender in the agrarian sector. Even the Supreme Court of India suggested, in a rather old-fashioned way, that women should not be seen sitting out in the open. This was met with an increase in the numbers of women gathering at the protest sites that challenged the popular conception of the role of women in the farming sector. These women deployed “unorthodox” modes of protest, and remained “disobedient while trying to voice democracy and reclaim citizenship. Women gathered together and recited poetry, remembering their sons who died by suicide as a result of agrarian distress. They cooked, supplied food, and sang songs of mourning” (Kaur 2020). The female body thus became a site of protest “https” (Gopinath, 2021).

Reclaiming the Volatile Body/Women’s Bodies

Our discussion of women’s bodies in recent times is informed by two ideas, or questions. Under what conditions do docile and disciplined bodies acquire volatility? And when does this volatile body acquire subjectivity and become a subject? Contrary to the idea that the article is marshalling too many facts and instances, the massing together of these facts demonstrates the diverse dimensions of the body (and body politics) during the time of the

pandemic. The concept of the subject stretches in diverse directions. In contemporary social sciences, the framework around which the issue of subject and subjectivity is discussed presents a variety of interconnected themes: one more explicitly related to the political idea of the subject as citizen; another focused on the embodied subject arising from feminism; and yet another centred on the anti-ontological idea of the subject, based on the question of difference and inspired by poststructuralism, postcolonialism, cultural studies, and critical studies on racism. Finally, and most recently, a further theme focused on the anti-anthropocentric idea of the subject related to technological-scientific studies as well as to biopolitical interpretations (Rebughini, 2014).

Subjectivity is always unfinished, related to immanent experiences, intersubjective relations, and affects, but also to the materiality of the body. The nomadic subject of our globalized world cannot be conceived as unitarian and monolithic; instead, we should study the subject's capacities for multiple and non-linear connections with other subjects, with opportunities to resist contemporary cognitive-capitalism and opportunities to innovate. (Rebughini, 2014). The body and mind—the soma and the psyche—are intertwined and interact in various complex ways. It is not the mind alone that leads the bodies to feel that they are united in some cause or experience. McNeill in his work has demonstrated how relentless group physical activity, e.g. of military drill or rhythmic marching around a parade ground, is a bodily experience that begins to produce a feeling of belonging to a larger whole than the mere individual body—of being larger than a single body. He describes this as muscular bonding, something that anthropologists have observed with reference to communities dancing rhythmically together. We also know that Hitler used this very effectively through the Nuremberg rally that he staged, as evidenced in the infamous footage by filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl (Blackman, 2008). Similarly, and on the obverse hand, moods and emotions can actually spread like “contagion,” a fact which has very significant implications for political mobilization. Such contagion-like situations of affective exchange have been recorded in history in diverse cultural settings. It is particularly relevant in the context of the Shaheen Bagh protest, where women across various disparate social groups and strata came together and forged a unique solidarity and unity. The article has attempted to conceptually leverage embodied resistance, performed connectivity, and (in)visibility politics to explore how gender, body, power, affect, performance, and injustice are expressed in various media and framed by digital media in the context of an unprecedented global health crisis (Mukherjee, 2021). We have argued in this article that the woman's body in India is usually a victim of violence or a receptacle of patriarchal expectations, but the three moments in this article show us different ways in which women's bodies have been mobilized to resist, challenge, negotiate and effect what could be a paradigm shift. This article suggests that if women's bodies constitute a complex sign system which we interpret to derive its meanings, both the semiotics and semantics of the way women have been constructed have undergone a change towards agency and a conscious mobilization of political subjectivities.

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