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**Democracy in Flux**

Order, Dynamics and Voices in Digital Public Spheres

# Digital Public Activism and the Redefinition of Citizenship

## The movement against the citizenship (amendment) act of India

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Social media, as a site of direct political communication and participation, allows for the study of citizenship-in-action. In this article, we explore the normative construction of citizenship by the citizens themselves. This relates to identity, values, and civic actions of citizenship (Coleman and Blumler, 2009), that is, its substantive rather than procedural aspects. Taken as a claims-making process (Tilly and Tarrow, 2006), citizenship can reflect solidarity, as well as competing loyalties in a diverse democracy (Gopal, 2013). How does this happen in the digital space, that is just as diverse when it comes to its avenues, affordances, and audiences? We take the case of India, the world's largest digitalising democracy, to study this.

On 11 December 2019, India passed the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), which, for the first time, made religion a part of citizenship to the detriment of the country's largest religious minority, the Muslims. This undermined the principle of secularism guaranteed by the Indian Constitution. This sparked off student-led protests, which under a month, grew into a country-wide movement comprising women, professionals, farmers, marginalised castes, and LGBTQ communities, all of whom, despite their differences, positioned themselves as protectors of a liberal republic against an illiberal state. At the same time, another group of citizens started protesting against the protesters. They projected themselves as defenders of the state, speaking on its behalf. This makes both a top-down study of citizenship as given by the state and a bottom-up study of citizenship gained through struggle against the state (Blaug, 2002; Gopal, 2013) limited. We take a different approach— a more horizontal study of citizenship as constructed through cooperation and contestation between citizens. This builds on the idea of 'actualising citizenship', where loose personal networks share information and organise civic action using social technologies (Bennett, 2008).

We use a constructivist approach to examine our research questions, which focus on the three core aspects of citizenship as articulated by the protesters (anti-CAA) and the state defenders (pro-CAA): (a) How did anti- and pro-CAA define themselves and others as citizens? (b) What values did anti- and pro-CAA ascribe to citizenship when it came to themselves and others? (c) What constituted the civic actions of anti- and pro-CAA? Instead of the state, citizens defined the attributes of 'good' and 'bad' citizenship. Social media activity, in this case, is taken to reflect ground reality.

Taking conversations as content, we examine texts, images, and videos from Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp from 11 December 2019 to 31 January 2020, the peak period of the protest. As Indians account for the largest number of social media accounts per person in the world (11.5 accounts/person: Dean 2021), a dataset from multiple platforms provides a rounded view of citizenship claims made by a more representative sample of citizens. We collected data by using the official API for each of the platform taking the hashtags #CAA, #CAB (Citizenship Amendment Bill), #CAA-NRC-NPR (National Register of Citizens and National Population Register that were associated with CAA), #NRC, #indiaagainstCAA, and #isupportcaa. We collected 500 random but purposive posts each from Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, which had more than 100 retweets and comments, indicating engagement. These posts were manually checked for being organic and not belonging to a political influencer so that they could be taken as an approximation for the voice of the person on the street. For WhatsApp, we joined public groups that discuss politics in India. We filtered data from 1000 such groups to code messages containing the keywords #CAA, #NRC, and #CAB. The posts of all four platforms were hand-coded for key words and qualitatively studied for themes associated with the three research questions.

Instagram was the most personalised and expressive platform while Twitter showed more citizens posting content of political influencers. However, the normative, descriptive, and performative attributes of citizenship were the same across platforms. In terms of identity, anti-CAA identified citizens as 'defenders of the constitution' (more than 96 per cent) while describing pro-CAA as 'anti-constitution' (more 94.8 per cent). The pro-CAA identified citizens as 'national' (more than 87 per cent) and anti-CAA as 'anti-national' (more than 71 per cent). In terms of values, 'right to dissent/peaceful protest' was the predominant self-ascribing citizenship value of anti-CAA (more than 75 per cent) while pro-CAA were described as 'supporting police brutality'. The pro-CAA's self-ascribing value was being 'responsible citizens' (more than 73 per cent), while describing anti-CAA as 'law breakers/ instigating violence' (more than 75 per cent). In terms of civic action, opinion mobilisation, information sharing, and call-to-action formed the bulk of anti-CAA (more than 68 to 94 per cent across platforms) and pro-CAA (59 to 92 per cent across platforms). About 76 per cent of WhatsApp posts were misinformation and hate speech against the anti-CAA. The anti-CAA used more images, videos, songs, memes, posters, and poems, asserting their legitimacy by reclaiming the Constitution and national flags and symbols. The pro-CAA used mostly videos, images, and accusatory content. The bulk of the most engaged content was that of the anti-CAA across platforms. In this contest, they gained definitional dominance. The digital space aided their construction of citizenship of inclusion, bringing them closer to what the Indian Political Scientist Kalpana Kannabiran (2021) has called 'constitution-as-commons'— a collective crafting of the jurisprudence of citizenship through civic engagement. This represents transformative jurisprudence where people arrogate to themselves the power and agency to deem themselves as citizens, determining its attendant values, rights, and responsibilities through collective deliberation. Citizenship as defined by the secondary attribute of nationalism is rejected as extreme statism, which is unjust and exclusionary.

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