

February 26, 2020

Our Brother's Keepers

The Solidarity of Shaheen Bagh

By: CM Naim

The protesters at Shaheen Bagh have built a solidarity that has not been derived from some legal or religious text but is drawn from their own direct experience. They say in their own plain fashion: we are our brother's keepers.

It is not uncommon to come across in resistance writings what is often called a “poem” by the German Pastor Martin Niemöller; it is actually a rather prosaically stated “confession” he first made in 1946 in a speech in Germany, after spending eight years in Nazi prisons for his views and sympathies. Pastor Niemöller, subsequently, continued to express the same sentiments in various forms at other occasions. Here is how he put it on October 14, 1968, in a speech before the [United States Congress](#):

When Hitler attacked the Jews I was not a Jew, therefore I was not concerned. And when Hitler attacked the Catholics, I was not a Catholic, and therefore, I was not concerned. And when Hitler attacked the unions and the industrialists, I was not a member of the unions and I was not concerned. Then Hitler attacked me and the Protestant church and there was nobody left to be concerned.

I was reminded of Niemöller's words when I came across the following in [the invaluable document](#) issued by a group of female students at the Jamia Millia. Here is how Abida (not her real name), a young mother of three children living near Jamia Nagar, described how she felt on December 13, 2020, after she experienced the wrath of the Delhi police on the grounds of the Jamia:

What decided it for me was that we had seen the police attack girls and hurt them. How can we step back now, I thought? Even I have three daughters and I have to educate them... Today it is these girls. Tomorrow it could be my daughters as well. [Then she wept as she said,] I am very scared. I swear to God my heart is frightened, but my inner self is not letting me stop. If I don't speak today, then tomorrow why should anyone else...I have to be in front.

Then she concludes, “We are housewives. Not terrorists.”

Abida perceives the situation as an existential crisis, and her immediate response is to discover and act upon what her “inner-self” commands.

Abida's courage is profoundly effective, as is the piercing truth of her logic, but I also find extremely moving her choice of words in the concluding sentences: she speaks as a “housewife.” An identity that is not necessarily esteemed by everyone but which, for Abida, describes the core of her being. She perceives the situation as an existential crisis, and her immediate response is to discover and act upon what her “inner-self” commands.

Now listen to Chanda Yadav, born and raised in a small village and just out of her teens; she is presently an undergraduate at the Jamia Millia. Here is how she [reflected](#) on what she experienced on December 13, 14 and 15:

My mother says come home, you have nothing to do with this; don't be in the forefront, stay back, girls should not be involved in all these things. You know how it is -- my family is very conservative, patriarchal. I come from Chandoli district in Uttar Pradesh, from a small village there. I am the first girl in my village to go to a university. I understand how they think but I cannot remain distant. This will affect the girls a lot --it is not easy for them to come to University; they have to negotiate with their family and then something like this will only make it more difficult. They are my friends, and this is my university.

Chanda and Abida are the *Vaishnava jana* who notice the pain of others; they see something of themselves in the lives of others and then respond in the most personal terms. The solidarity they place upfront does not validate itself by referring to some legal or religious text; it is entirely experiential. We may read their actions as we wish, but it would be much to our loss if we totally ignore

what they say in their own plain fashion: we are our brother’s keepers.

“Shaheen Iqra is a homemaker,” writes Salik Ahmad. Shaheen was among the first group of women who sat down in Shaheen Bagh to protest on December 15, 2019. When she first stood up to address the group, “her legs quivered. She uttered a long prayer under her breath before the first words came out of her mouth.... *Zulm* (oppression) has crossed all limits, she said.” Weeks later she says, “We have seen a lot in these one-and-a-half months. We have seen goons coming here and firing. We have been accused of doing this for money.” Then Ahmad tells us, almost incidentally, what for me is her most important statement. “From our Sikh brothers and sisters who have come in our support we heard about the torture Sikhs faced in Punjab. We heard about the killings and rapes of Kashmiri Pandits. Once this protest is over, I’m going to read about these things.”

Shaheen Bagh was in its origin an act of solidarity with the victims of a very local act of brutality, and only later became a political protest against a national tyranny.

The demonstration at Shaheen Bagh may continue for a while more. As may also the other similar demonstrations across the country that involve Muslim “homemakers” and “housewives.” No matter what the future holds concerning the legal machinations of the political beasts, one can be certain that any number of “ordinary” Muslim women will continue to think and act differently, often, we can expect, much to the consternation of the males of the community. At Shaheen Bagh, a so-called *maulana* was turned away when he tried to adopt some posture of leadership, and in Kanpur, the women sitting on a similar *dharna* in Chamangunj flatly refused to listen to the two Qazis of the city who had come to dissuade them, and sent them packing. In Lucknow, a Shi’ah cleric has called for an end to the demonstrations against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), but apparently has not been listened to and the demonstration by women at Husainabad has continued.



Students and local residents at the continuous sit-in protest at Shaheen Bagh | Ali Shoeb

The protest at Shaheen Bagh began on December 15, chiefly in response to the horrific display of police brutality against the students of the Jamia that day. It was in its origin an act of solidarity with the victims of a very local act of brutality, and only later became a political protest against a national tyranny. Shaheen Bagh, Batla House, Abul Fazal Enclave and other dominantly Muslim habitations in that area owe their existence to the Jamia. Few people are aware that the Jamia came into existence in Aligarh in 1920, was brought from there to Karol Bagh in Old Delhi in 1926, and finally moved to the then tiny village of Okhla in 1935-36. During the 85 years of its own growth and evolution, Jamia’s educational and social welfare projects directly benefitted the surrounding existing villages and also the much newer colonies; in fact, the sense of security its proximity provided brought them into existence in the first place. A violent attack on the students of the Jamia must have felt to the non-academic residents of these neighborhoods as a direct blow to their own bodies.

What stood out for me in the news in December was the fact that though the same evening equally vicious attacks by the police took place on the campus of the Aligarh Muslim University — an eye blinded at the Jamia, an arm amputated at the AMU — and yet no “Shaheen Bagh” came about in Aligarh. There was no *dharna* by the women of Dodhpur and Sir Syed Nagar in Aligarh. In fact, from what I was able to access on the internet, there was no action of solidarity by the non-academic Muslim population in and around the AMU campus. Why should that be case? And why were female students at the AMU so absent in the early demonstrations that they

found mention in the news only after mid-January?

There was within the obviously political action at the Jamia a core of human solidarity — *apolitical, palpably felt and experientially justified* — that had transcended gender and religion boundaries.

Needless to say, no definite answer can be gained without extensive research, but I find it significant that the student protesters at Aligarh, as deduced by the names reported in the press, were not only all male, they also had only Muslim-sounding names. In vivid contrast, the protesters at the Jamia included members of both sexes, and were not exclusively Muslim either. There was within the obviously political action at the Jamia a core of human solidarity — *apolitical, palpably felt and experientially justified* — that had transcended gender and religion boundaries. Chanda and Abida were able to be together “on the barricades,” so to say, because the Jamia had made it possible, and they and others like them had chosen to act that day upon a solidarity that was anchored in their own direct experience. Their actions were not the result of some elevated political consciousness.

Several articles have since appeared in the English language press that dilate upon a perceived significance of the Shaheen Bagh *dharna* and what it suggests concerning the politics of the Muslims of India in the near future. One particularly assertion repeatedly made is that what was new and most promising was the appeal of the demonstrator to the Indian *Samvidhan*, that, in doing so, the women of Shaheen Bagh had given a new life to constitutionalism in India. “Not merely using the Constitution to save themselves, but actually leading the fight to save the Constitution on everyone’s behalf.”

We can only rejoice that many young women and men in India are finding their own ways of standing up to these pretenders and asking: “Where is Abel our brother? What have you done to him?”

I fear I cannot be so sanguine. Not too long ago, when the law banning Triple Talaq was under discussion, the Urdu press reported scattered demonstrations by Muslim women who opposed it—they too appealed to the secular nature of the Constitution of India in support of their cause. I find it impossible to ignore the long but ultimately futile struggle of Zakia Jafri to get justice, the pain of the mother of the still “missing” JNU student Najib Ahmad, or the silent grief of the wives and children of the publicly lynched men whose names are now mostly forgotten. Those Muslim women too sought justice promised to them by the Constitution, and their success, had it happened, would have strengthened the Constitution for all citizens. But it did not happen. Why should things turn out differently this time?

That’s why I limit myself to a small personal claim: I take much solace only in the statements of Abida, Chanda Yadav, and Shaheen Iqra. They did not abide by any received wisdom, and instead showed a willingness to gamble on the truth of their own felt experience. And I take some solace in the fact that more than half of India’s present population is below the age of 25, and in large numbers willing to take a chance on the wisdom of their hearts instead of the received wisdom of their elders. Perhaps they will do what the elders failed to do.

In the Old Testament story, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him. Then the Lord spoke to Cain, and asked, “Where is Abel your brother?” Cain replied, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” In present day India, many would be “Lords” are on a rampage, their hands stained with blood. We can only rejoice that many young women and men in India are finding their own ways of standing up to these pretenders and asking: “Where is Abel our brother? What have you done to him?”