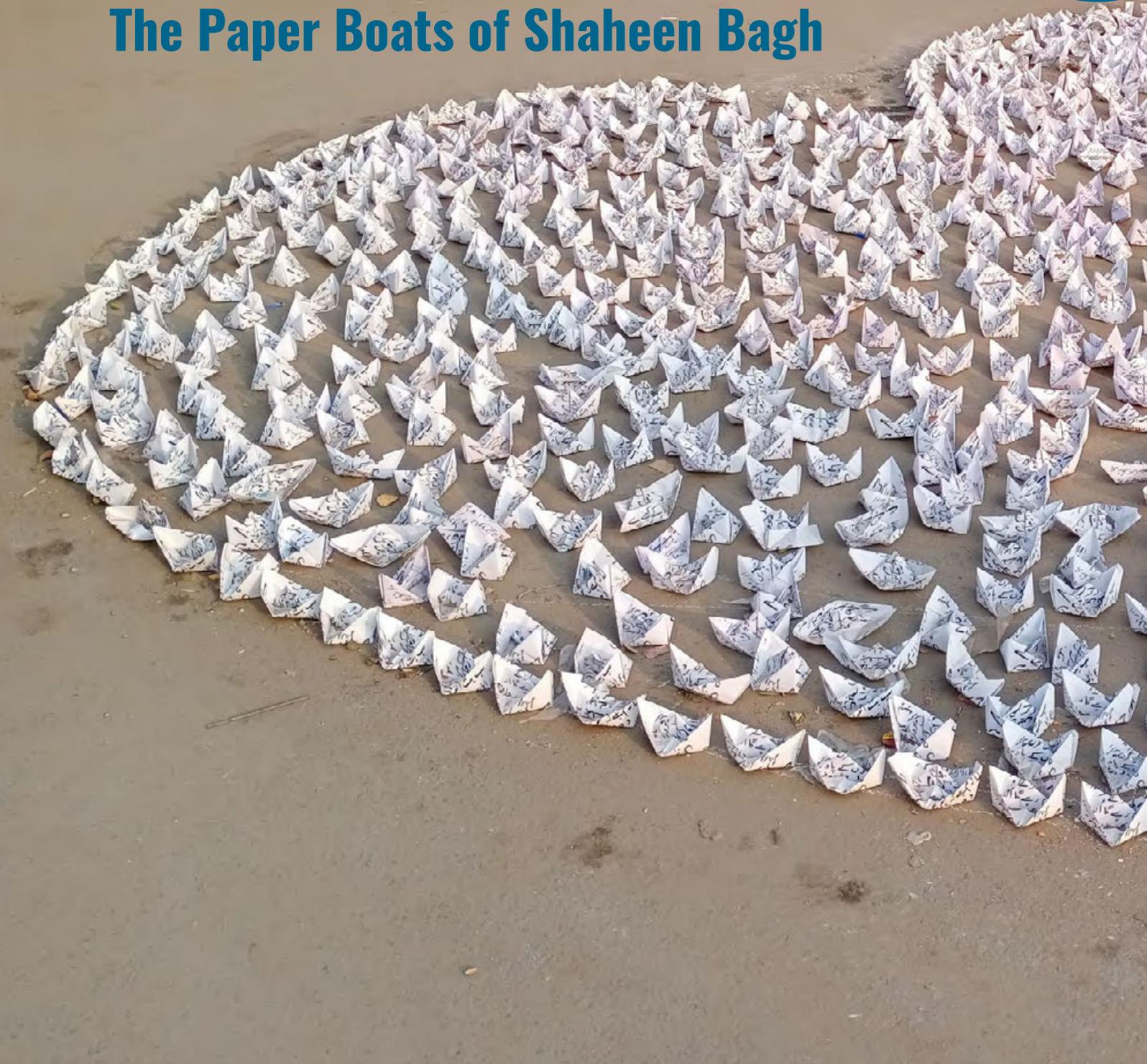


A Sea of Song

The Paper Boats of Shaheen Bagh





On a crisp winter evening in January 2020, when the streets of New Delhi were swaddled in shawls, blankets, and makeshift bonfires, I exited the warmth of a metro coach filled with radiant, pulsating bodies at Jasola Vihar station. Since the onset of the peaceful demonstration at Shaheen Bagh in December 2019, the metro station had become a landmark, a confluence towards which tributaries of people gushed from every corner of the megacity to visit the protest site. As if anticipating the arrival of visitors from the metro, a wave of sounds would rise up to the elevated bridge that connected the exit with the road below, its railings adorned with colourful banners proclaiming slogans of secularism and democracy, tacked and strung along the length of the corridor and staircase. Under the guise of controlling cross-border migration from neighbouring countries, the central government of India (a coalition led by the Hindu fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party) amended the citizenship provisions of the Indian constitution, redefining the qualifications required to claim citizenship of India and demeriting members of the Muslim community specifically. In response to the cumulative fury at the physical attacks on dissenting students by the central police force and the legal violence of the Constitutional Amendment Bill 2019 (now an Act), which would strip many residents of their existing citizenship and empower the state to restrain them in detention centres that resemble labour camps, Muslim women in a small neighbourhood in New Delhi began an indefinite sit-in protest, which came to be identified as the Shaheen Bagh protest site. Shaheen Bagh became the nucleus of a rhizomatic network of protests across India, presenting a vision for challenging brute authoritarianism and legal excess by a repressive state. The strategies of resistance produced at Shaheen Bagh came to be adopted across other sites: unyielding sit-ins by women who braved the cold nights of Delhi under a feeble *shamiyana* (makeshift tent) and an atmosphere of sharing, be it of quilts, food, or other modes of sustenance, was supplemented by unconditional hospitality extended to each visitor – including members of the police force sent to monitor and surveil the protest – as they were offered *samosas* (fried snacks) and hot tea by voluntary committees led by local residents and students.

We will see

At Shaheen Bagh, art erupted from the *shamiyana* that hosted the sit-in, which began with and was led by Muslim women protesters, and which grew to include thousands of participants, most notably students. Shaheen Bagh's invocations spilled into the surrounding lanes – found on flyers resting on plastic tables at adjacent *dhabas* (food stalls), spreading into the painted streets, climbing up the staircase and travelling on the metro to every corner of the city. They travelled in the form of pins and booklets, books, illustrated posters, flyers, and witnessings of radical civic dissent

and solidarity that continue to be venerated by the many who participated in and observed the protest. The Shaheen Bagh protest redefined its surrounding landscape, creating a sensorium of collectivity that touched the land, air, and sky alike with its vision of a secular nation – art installations filled the horizon, songs of peace and *azaadi* (freedom) soared through the lanes, and the ground was nourished with the feet and hands of hundreds drawing and resting upon it. It was on this ground, christened by the unrelenting spirit of a *chakka jam* (road blockage) led by Muslim women as a form of civic protest, with the street claimed for peaceful demonstration, that I first glimpsed the undulating shape of a heart made with candles. Paper boats made with simple origami folds, carefully assembled to fill up the shape, trembled in the cold wind and among the flickering flames. Illuminated by candlelight, the script printed



on the paper with which the boats were made was strong and assertive. It held lines from Faiz Ahmad Faiz's poem, "Wa Yabqa Wajh-o-Rabbik", popularly known by the refrain in the lyric "Hum Dekhenge" (We will see). The poem had become an anthem that winter of the Anti-CAA protests. It surged from the lungs of protesters, it was scribbled on walls and minds, and it was recited frequently by the protesters at Shaheen Bagh. The poem holds steadfast in its conviction that all tyrannies will be witnessed, remembered, and surmounted on the day of judgement, written in the context of another dictatorial state and sung throughout history as a warning against unfettered power. Faiz penned the

poem in 1979, months after a military coup led by General Zia-ul-Haq gained control of Pakistan in 1978. The lyrics of the poem counter the religious conservatism of the military regime by placing "true faith" in the hearts of those who bear witness to history.

The lines from the poem were rendered in Urdu script which ran through the folded boats. Upon closer look, I could see that at the bottom of the heart, where two candles met to make a pointed conclusion, there sat a toy military tank. The miniature tank figurine appeared frozen in front of the boats, its diminutive plastic scale made to seem even smaller by the cascade of paper forms.

Folding

It was my first encounter with artist Arif Naeem's installation at Shaheen Bagh, titled after the poem which it inscribed and transformed into the shape of a boat. A graduate of the MFA programme at Jamia Millia Islamia, Naeem had been working with the form of paper boats in public installations for years before Shaheen Bagh. Yet, I couldn't help but wonder that his choice of the form and the constellations of ideas it beckoned found its home at the protest site – a place where *making* was wrested from the limits of individualism and transformed into a collective verb. When Naeem began the work of creating the installation at Shaheen Bagh, he had with him xerox copies of Faiz's poem, scripted elegantly by his father and then photocopied, and chalk for drawing on the ground. He had invited friends and acquaintances, but was hopeful that others present at the site would join in. He was not mistaken. As people sat on the ground, folding sheets of paper into boats with him, Naeem had realized the participatory ideal he sought with each project. Naeem informed me that the candles which illuminated the heart made from paper-boats were placed there at night by protesters on site, an act of care and custodianship that is emblematic of the commons. A focus on art-making as a communicative act, a moment of inhabiting a public space together, sharing time and exchanging ideas among strangers – all this has been a focus of his practice, and at Shaheen Bagh the installation became a gathering place that in delimiting its surroundings, created a hub for resting, gazing, and conversation. To Naeem, the boats are a metaphor – a vehicle for life, destiny, and stewardship. At the Shaheen Bagh protest site, the boats also stood in for the bodies that were stateless, suspended between exile and refuge, stripped

of rights, shunted into detention centres, and maligned in xenophobic speech. It was these bodies that the Indian state had been steadily controlling through the narrative of sifting “illegal outsiders” and “legitimate citizens” on the basis of religion that the Citizenship Amendment Act ossified into the force of law. The protesters at Shaheen Bagh were asserting not only their own stake in citizenship, but the abrogation of a fundamental tenet of the Indian constitution, which lists secularism as a basic principle. The medium of paper was especially prudent, as the production of impossible documents to trace ancestry was the requirement of claiming citizenship under the rubric of CAA. “Kaagaz nahi dikhayenge”, which translates to “We will not show the papers”, was a poem penned by Varun Grover during the protests that conveyed the widespread sentiment of refusal to perform the act of documentary compliance with a discriminatory law. In Naeem's hands, and the hands of many others who joined in, paper became a medium for countering power. A boat evokes a transient space, a testament to migration as a journey, crossing over, or passage that runs against the ideas of cartographic fixity and impermeability of borders. The boats at Shaheen Bagh recalled the struggles of refugees stranded at sea and seized on borderlands. As an installation, as the boats converged against the figurine of the military tank, overcoming state violence was given a visual possibility. A symbol of playfulness and joy, the paper boats bore words of freedom and residues of a life of collective tending and care that was emblematic of the community that Shaheen Bagh became, a porous place that would welcome in solidarity and support movements speaking truth to power around the world.

The material of protest

Driven by poetic traditions and histories of peaceful protest, Naeem also lists John Lennon as a figure of inspiration. It is not coincidental that the medium of paper – a light, organic material that is inexpensive, ubiquitous, and tactile, that spatializes the possibilities of mark-making and inscription – has also been found recently in the form of colourful sticky-notes, dubbed Lennon Walls¹, in the subway networks of Hong Kong during anti-extradition protests of 2019, and which have a longer history originating in the Umbrella movement for universal suffrage in 2014. The malleable and proliferatory nature of paper has also been galvanized in the form of paper *samosa packets* (fried snack packets) by artist Sofia Karim in a joint-artistic project titled *Turbine Bagh* (2020), for which folded paper packets were printed with photojournalistic and artistic documentation from the sub-continent to draw attention to recent authoritarian excess and violations in Bangladesh and India.

Samosas and fried snacks with tea are community-led offerings at protest sites, and the practice of community nourishment and sharing of snacks flourished in Shaheen Bagh as well. The ordinariness of packets, notes, and origami shapes help root the protest as an exceptional event in the daily lives of its participants, harkening the familiar into a potent force at such public sites, and depositing residues of protest as a limited temporal frame into the longer, continuing tides of their private lives. As participants carried back ephemera from the site, they were also extending both its geographic radius and narrative afterlife. Recounting an encounter during the assembly of the paper boat installation, Naeem described how a woman with a child came up to him and narrated her experience with origami as a schoolgirl. From the paper that was being used to make the boats, she fashioned an origami rose and presented it to Naeem – a paper flower he treasures to date.

A few days after the installation was mounted, there was a downpour. Yet, the boats stood, brimming atop the shallow pools of water which had gathered – standing steadfast as the protesters continued to sing, chant, and recite together. Naeem was drawn to the fragility of a paper boat, its unknowable journey in the rain as a symbol of hope against the dark. At Shaheen Bagh, dawn and dusk became a twin phenomenon in the light of a thousand shining eyes, and hope beamed over the darkness of an endless night.

Illustrations

- p. 122: An installation view of the participatory work titled *Hum Dekhenge* (2020) by Arif Naeem at Shaheen Bagh, Arif Naeem, 2020.
- p. 125: A close-up view of the participatory work titled *Hum Dekhenge* (2020) by Arif Naeem at Shaheen Bagh. The hand-inked text in Urdu script on the paper is from the poem *Wa Yabqa Wajh-o-Rabbik* by Faiz Ahmad Faiz.

Endnotes

- 1 See: *The Art of Protest in Hong Kong*, p. 22.