



Anil Shakya

# People's Advocates

A country-wide organisation of lawyers has been actively helping anti-CAA protesters who have been detained or face harassment and prosecution, all for free. This is a historic mobilisation. Who are they and what is their motivation?

By Nupur Dogra

**M**ISHIKA Singh, a lawyer, had gone to attend the protests against the December 15 crackdown on Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI) by Delhi police at Jantar Mantar. When police started detaining peaceful protesters she spontaneously made a WhatsApp group called “Lawyers for detainees” which added the contact numbers of lawyers who had volunteered to help the detain-

ees. Soon, what started as a peer-to-peer lawyers’ group in Delhi became a strong network of around 200-plus lawyers across the country almost overnight. Her name and number along with a list of mobile numbers of other lawyers ready to help detainees went viral on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter.

What followed was a historic countrywide mobilisation of lawyers. During Union Home Minister Amit Shah’s outreach in an area of Delhi on January 5,

**PRESERVING RIGHT TO PROTEST**  
In the wake of the crackdown on anti-CAA protesters, Indian lawyers take charge.

to promote the governments’ Citizenship (Amendment) Act, two women displayed a banner on their balcony that read, “Shame; CAA and NRC”, while his rally was passing by. Within minutes, they found a 150-plus angry mob, including their landlord, banging at their doors. Surya Rajappan, one of the



“We have people working on the ground everywhere including lawyers as well as non-lawyers who volunteer to coordinate with protesters in need of legal help.”

—Advocate Mishika Singh

two women stuck in the apartment and an advocate by profession, immediately put out an SOS message from her phone. Within a few hours a bunch of lawyers gathered outside her house and managed safe passage for the girls.

**I**n Chennai, on January 17, around 250 lawyers including senior advocates R Vaigai and Nalini Chidambaram, and advocate NGR Prasad formed a human chain in and around the Madras High Court premises and read aloud from the Constitution of India in protest against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act.

Since the protests against the CAA have erupted across the country, SOS messages like “lawyers needed urgently” have become a common sight on social media. Advisories on how to deal with the police in case of detention, messages like; “Don’t be silent. Don’t be violent” and “Educate, Agitate, Organize” have been shared excessively amongst netizens, including celebrities and politicians. Detailed and simplified “To do lists” were circulated across the social media prepared by lawyers to guide protesters on how to agitate peacefully and what to do in case of deten-



“One lawyer was let inside the police station after 4-5 hours. Later, a few minors were released and FIRs lodged for some detainees with senior lawyers’ help.”

—Advocate Mohd. Faris

tion by police.

Mishika Singh, who is at the forefront of the lawyers’ movement, has received calls from lawyers actively working on the ground from across the country to help detainees and protesters. She has been coordinating lawyers across the country for over a month.

She told *India Legal*: “The network of lawyers working on the ground has become so strong that it not only reaches the protest sites and police stations when needed but is also successful in immediately dispensing any kind of false rumours and fake news being spread about the movement through counter facts being shared through social media.”

Another historic instance of lawyer activism in India was witnessed on 20 December. That afternoon, a picture of a young girl offering a rose to police personnel while protesting went viral. However, within a few hours, news of violent clashes between the police and anti-CAA protesters started doing the rounds. Following the clashes, news of detention of injured protesters including minors reached this network of lawyers who gathered outside the Daryaganj police station with a team of doctors.



“Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp have become tools for speedy mobilisation with calls for lawyers going out through stories, tweets, and voice notes.”

—Sukhniidh Kaur, Researcher & Blogger

Advocate Mohd. Faris was one of the lawyers who answered the call to gather outside the Daryaganj police station in Delhi. While recalling the harrowing event, he told *India Legal* that around 8 pm in news of a lathi charge by Delhi Police on protesters who had gathered at Delhi Gate and were trying to march towards Jantar Mantar came in. Protesters who were detained included injured people and minors. The lawyers were barred from entering the police station for hours and none of them was allowed to meet any detainee. This group of lawyers along with a team of doctors persisted and stood outside the police station through the night to help the detainees and their families. “After trying to convince the police for four to five hours, only one lawyer was allowed inside the police station and around 4 am eight to nine minors were released and an FIR was lodged for a few detainees with the help of senior lawyers.” said Faris.

These lawyers have been braving the system and trolls for the past month, 24/7. They, especially women lawyers, have faced unpleasant and unnecessary calls since their mobile numbers were made public. They went on with their ▶



**LAWYERS UNITE AGAINST THE CAA**  
Lawyers form a human chain at Madras High Court to register protest.

job despite all this, guided by their desire to preserve the constitutional right to protest.

Lawyer Akshita Manocha told *India Legal*: “The lawyer community has displayed tremendous unity and strength while helping the common man protesting on the ground in every way possible. Though lawyers working to help detainees are doing a fabulous job, there are also a huge number of lawyers who are working in the background through simple legal advisories and extending emotional support to people protesting.”

“A lot of protesters were first-timers and were unaware on the legality of detentions and their limits as protesters. When people were detained in buses and dropped off on the outskirts of Delhi, they were caught by surprise. Lawyers provided them with assurances on their rights and continuously kept reminding them to stay calm and not indulge in violence or any activity that might further aggravate the situation,” Manocha adds.

Many lawyers use social media to circulate easy-to-understand explanations of the CAA and NRC to counter myths and rumours being spread about the Act and its implications. Instagram accounts of bloggers played a significant part in taking the voices of these lawyers to mil-

lions of people. “Anti-CAA protests have strengthened the intersection of social media and legal justice. Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp have become tools for speedy mobilisation with calls for lawyers going out through stories, tweets, and voice notes. Legal advice regarding detention and arrest is translated to shareable content. Lawyers are organising themselves through resource lists and web portals. India’s legal fraternity has come together to create a structure of support around the protesters like never before,” says Sukhmidh Kaur, a student and researcher, whose Instagram account and blog have been documenting every protest taking place across the country and who has been instrumental in connecting lawyers’ to the masses through her huge following. Many such accounts of social media influencers and bloggers have forwarded lawyers advice to millions across India. After the JMI crackdown, a Google document has been circulating which contains spreadsheets with contact numbe-

**After the JMI crackdown, a Google document with spreadsheets of numbers of lawyers, journalists, psychologists and doctors who have volunteered to help protestors has been circulated.**

rs of lawyers, journalists, psychologists and doctors who have volunteered to help protesters.

Lawyers have become the backbone of mass anti-CAA protests. They are coming forward to defend the rights of people to protest peacefully. Many of them are fighting cases and helping in release of detainees for free.

**J**ust because they are lawyers doesn't mean that their struggle is easy. They are constantly at risk of harassment and targeted police action. On January 18, a Rajasthan-based lawyer, Mohammad Faisal, alleged that he was wrongly picked up by the SOG team of the Uttar Pradesh Police from inside Kairana Court. He had gone at the behest of the National Confederation of Human Rights (NCHR) to find facts regarding alleged illegal detentions at Shamli. Later, he told reporters that he was in judicial custody for 13 to 14 days and was physically tortured by the UP police, including electric shocks being given.

The kind of activism displayed by lawyers in India is unprecedented and shows the depth of feeling against the CAA and its constitutional and legal loopholes and the impending nationwide National Register of Citizens.

Many of these lawyers as well as the protesting youth are essentially those who have grown up in a post-independence India and have cultivated the sense of “constitutional morality” which Dr. BR Ambedkar had envisioned when he drafted the Constitution and called for developing social democracy in “temperament rather than just in theory”. He had declared that citizens should “have a natural inclination to liberty, a natural respect for law, good humour, intolerance of foul play, the knowledge of how and when to compromise and distrust...”

It is safe to say that Indian lawyers are taking his exhortations to heart. ■