

# The Siege of Aligarh Muslim University

15th December: How the UP Police  
reduced a university to a battleground

## A Fact Finding Report

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No CAA  
No NRC  
No NPR



Karwan - E - Mohabbat  
& Indian Cultural Forum



# **The Siege of Aligarh Muslim University**

15<sup>th</sup> December 2019: How the UP police reduced a university to a battleground

***Fact-Finding Report – 17 December 2019***  
*Karwan e Mohabbat and Indian Cultural Forum*

*A young doctoral scholar lay calmly on his hospital bed in Aligarh. We could not have mustered his courage and equanimity. Just two nights earlier, his palm had been blown off by a lethal missile fired by the police. Doctors amputated his hand to save his life. His main concern at this point was how he would break this news to his mother, and if she would survive it.*

*A little earlier, we met a young law student of the Aligarh Muslim University, just 19 years old, his broken hand in a cast. A day scholar, he was trying to flee from the library to his home after police stormed into his university campus on the night of 15<sup>th</sup> December. He was one of the unfortunate students who the police detained, after lashing him with batons, breaking his hand. In the truck, he reports that the policemen repeatedly taunted them with communal slurs, and twisted his broken hand to torment him more. In the police station, he was stripped naked and beaten with a leather belt. He showed us the welts on his body.*

*But he was unwilling to lodge a formal complaint against the police. Many students told us that they had been warned by the university authorities that if any student filed a complaint, he would be expelled from the university and criminal charges, even under the dreaded National Security Act, would be lodged against them. As a result, many injured students did not even go to public hospitals for fear of their names appearing in public records.*

In the light of reports of violent attacks on students by police and RAF personnel on the campus of Aligarh Muslim University, Uttar Pradesh, a fact-finding team of concerned civil society members including lawyers, human rights workers, journalists and academics visited AMU on 17 December 2019. This fact-finding team was led by Harsh Mander (human rights and peace worker, and writer), Nandini Sundar (Professor, Delhi University), John Dayal

(senior journalist and human rights activist), Natasha Badhwar (Film-maker), Vimal (human rights activist with NAPM), Ankita Ramgopal (Lawyer, Karwan e Mohabbat), Sumit Kumar Gupta (Lawyer, Karwan e Mohabbat), Ishita Mehta (Indian Writers Forum), Varda Dixit (Indian Writers Forum), Varna Balakrishnan (Researcher, Karwan e Mohabbat), Syed Mohammad Zaheer (Researcher, Karwan e Mohabbat), Anwar Haque (Karwan e Mohabbat) and Sandeep Yadav (Photographer, Karwan e Mohabbat). We met with nearly 100 members of faculty, students, doctors and several members of the university administration including the Registrar and the Proctor of Aligarh Muslim University. We could not meet the Vice Chancellor because we were told that he was 'out of station', which we found a little curious given that just a day had intervened since the violence on the campus and the continuing crisis on the campus.<sup>1</sup>

We entered AMU campus from the Bab-e-Syed gate in the afternoon of 17th December, 2019. Apart from barricades and a few armed police personnel at the University Circle, there was little sign of the extensive deployment that the campus saw on 15th December, when the violence broke out. We did not see blood spots and broken vehicles, but tear gas shells were visible in various places. All signs of the violence had been expertly removed despite the intervention of only a single day since the violence, perhaps by the authorities on 16th morning itself. What was left, however, was the eerie silence of a desolate university campus without its students. By the 17th, almost all of the 21,000 resident students were evicted from its premises. We met with the faculty, a group of nearly a hundred individuals, who had gathered to meet us at the Staff Club. However, their collective strength too failed to hide the atmosphere of mourning that had clouded AMU by then. All tea stalls and canteens within the university and its vicinity, except the one at the Trauma Centre, were shut. Regardless, the town of Aligarh that we crossed to reach the campus continued with life as usual.

As we began our fact-finding, many of those present agreed to speak to us, but only on the condition of anonymity. Their testimonies revealed that the University administration, district authorities and the State Government, not only failed in their duty to protect the campus and

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<sup>1</sup> This report has inputs from all the members of the fact-finding team. We acknowledge the contributions of Syed Mohammad Zaheer and Varna Balakrishnan, Research Fellows, Karwan e Mohabbat in authoring significant portions of the Report. The Report also draws from an article on the Fact Finding written by Harsh Mander for Scroll.in. Whereas we have tried to carefully verify the facts stated in this Report, the responsibility for any mistakes lies entirely with Harsh Mander.

its residents against brutality by the Uttar Pradesh police, but also that they in fact invited the police forces and their weapons into the campus. Apart from the breach of the discursive and educational space of the university, **there were also unbridled human rights violations committed in AMU.**

Overall, the story which emerged was one of largely unprovoked police violence in AMU, more brutal than even in Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI), New Delhi, and indeed than in any university in recent memory. Also, of a university administration which unconscionably abandoned its students and threw them to a hostile and pitiless state.

## Sequence of Events

Students on campus were peacefully demonstrating against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC) since 11<sup>th</sup> December, by holding mass hunger strikes, silent marches, and theatre. On 13<sup>th</sup> December just two days before the brutal lathi charge, the students took out a peaceful rally in which it is estimated that more than fourteen thousand students participated. The rally was taken out till University Circle<sup>2</sup> which is the end limit of the campus and no untoward incident took place. The faculty was requested by the administration to ensure their presence during the rally, as this was a tradition of AMU to have teachers and faculty members peacefully manage the students.

However, on the 15<sup>th</sup> night, as the news of the use of brutal force by the Delhi police against students of Jamia Millia Islamia came pouring in, over 1000 students assembled to protest the brutality at the main gate (Bab-e-Syed)<sup>3</sup>, unaware that they too would soon have to face even worse attacks from the UP police and RAF. Most of the faculty of Aligarh University, who live very close by to the campus, heard loud sounds of shots and ambulances coming from the university somewhere between 8:30 and 9:00 pm, and then the police and RAF entered the campus. Shocked, they ran calls to each other. By the time night set in, internet and SMS services had been blacked out in the area. Teachers who heard about the incident

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<sup>2</sup> University Circle is located outside Bab-e-Syed and is very much a part of Aligarh Muslim University which houses the University Administration and Vice Chancellor's Office.

<sup>3</sup> Bab-e-Syed is the traditional place of protest in AMU since it was established

immediately tried to contact the Proctorial Team and others present including EC Member on the scene and offered if any assistance they needed from them. They were however advised to not enter the campus as the situation there had turned seriously violent after the Rapid Action Force and police lathi charged the students. Members of the Proctorial board also denied needing any assistance from the faculty in controlling the situation.

The nature of violence that was since let loose on the students is extremely disturbing and has left many of them with shattered bones, grave injuries, deep bruises, and severe psychological trauma. Here are the sequence of events as reported to us by the faculty and students of Aligarh Muslim University.

On the **9<sup>th</sup> of December 2019**, the BJP government in the Centre passed the Citizenship Amendment Act in the Lok Sabha. The Act grants citizenship rights to Hindus, Jains, Buddhists, Christians, Sikhs, and Parsis who have migrated to India from its three neighbouring countries of Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Students of Aligarh Muslim University began peaceful protests against CAA, NRC, & NPR by holding debates, discussion and department level protest demonstrations. It is important to note that this and all subsequent student protests were held within the university campus. The next day, students, along with the proctorial team assembled at Bab-e-Syed to lead a Mashaal Juloos up to the University Circle which is the end limit of the campus. Neither the faculty or the Student were aware that Section 144 (CrPC) had been imposed on campus. Consequently, the police filed FIRs against 12-13 named students and 700 unnamed students for violating Section 144. On **11<sup>th</sup> December**, after CAA was passed by Rajya Sabha, the students held a mass hunger strike by boycotting the dining halls and held flash protest across many departments. All this while, the students were fulfilling all their academic obligations - studying in libraries and their hostel rooms, and preparing for and writing the semester end examinations.

On **12<sup>th</sup> December**, students continued to register their peaceful protest with a large number of female students participating in it. On **13<sup>th</sup> December**, at around 2 pm, the students organised a peaceful protest and submitted a memorandum to the District Administration. At 4 pm, there was a protest rally by the Faculty members, from Staff Club towards Faiz Gate, till

the Registrar Office Gates where police barricades had been erected. They submitted another memorandum to the district administration, addressed to the President and CJI, registering their protest against the CAA.

Since 9<sup>th</sup> December a huge deployment of RAF and police had been stationed at the University Circle, just outside the University Gate, and until the night of 15<sup>th</sup> December, the university was functioning as usual. 14<sup>th</sup> December passed off peacefully and all exams were conducted as per the schedule.

## **Violence on 15th December 2019**

### *At the university campus*

The exact circumstances in which the RAF entered the campus remain unclear. Students attest that there was no provocation from their end to instigate the violence. The faculty also, largely agree with this. What we know is that first, tear gas shelling took place across the gate, and eventually the police and RAF entered the campus. Lathi charge on students and property started since.

As the news of the vicious lathi charge on the students at JMI on 15<sup>th</sup> December 2019 reached Aligarh, two groups of students met at the Library Canteen. They decided to hold a General Body Meeting at 8:30 pm to register a protest in their campus and stand in solidarity with JMI students. The students had firmly resolved to keep their protests peaceful as they feared that the administration and authorities were waiting for an excuse of violence to shut down the University. Students and teachers estimate that there were 1000-2000 students who were protesting peacefully within the campus premises.

It is crucial to note here that despite having been strong participants in the preceding protests, on the 15<sup>th</sup> night, all women students were closed within their hostel premises until they were evicted on the 16<sup>th</sup> morning. Women students have been denied their right to protest after nightfall in AMU through the imposition of an arbitrary curfew, which they have been resisting in the past. During protests in the main campus, women are strictly denied their weekly 'outings' and are actively discouraged from participating in anything outside the

women's campus. On the 12th, however, they had broken the gates of Indira Gandhi Hall, AMU, to join the protests.

The Vice Chancellor claims to have invited the forces into the university, but it is unclear then why the RAF soldiers broke down the gates. We speculate about the possibility that his permission was perhaps post facto, to give a legal façade to their campus entry. The University leadership (the Vice Chancellor, the Registrar and the Proctor) maintain that incidents of stone-throwing and other violence led them to ask the RAF and police to enter the university campus to restore peace and safeguard life and property in the campus. But if this was indeed the case, it is unclear why the Babe-e-Syed gate itself had been broken into four pieces, with a corner of the heavy iron gate cut out with precision, while the locks were intact. The point is that if the RAF was invited by the university leadership to enter the campus, then why would they have to break in through the gates. It is possible - but difficult at this stage to confirm - that the University officials signed the papers inviting the RAF into the campus *after* they had entered, in order to legitimize and legalize their entry. But we only state this as a possibility, which requires more careful verification.

The University teachers who had gathered told us in one voice that in earlier times of tension and student anger on campus, rather than calling in the police and armed security personnel, it is the faculty which would be alerted to calm the students and restore peace and discipline, and this almost always worked. But the University leadership chose not to do this and immediately call in the security forces (or legitimize their campus entry). During this time, students ran desperate calls for help to their faculty who expressed helplessness as they could neither enter the campus nor send help to save these students from the brutal police repression.

Students report that many unidentified persons in civilian clothes with masked faces, people who did not belong to the student community, were instigating violence from both ends of the gate. In a video footage created from the police's end of the gate, there appears to be a man in plain clothes throwing stones towards the students, across the gate. Students report that these men had covered their faces, and none of them were, in their knowledge, admitted to the nearest hospital despite being at the frontlines.

The police and RAF entered the campus and dispersed amongst the students. Doctors who tried to reach the site on ambulances report that there were about 1200 to 1300 police and RAF personnel, whom they could see en route<sup>4</sup>. The policepersons and soldiers chased the terrified students everywhere, including into hostels and guest houses, firing teargas shells, stun grenades and reportedly bullets. They ran where they could. Some went into the university Guest House, others into hostels. Some even hid in terror for three hours behind the curtains of the mosque. We visited the heritage Morrison Boys' Hostel, where soldiers beat up guards and fired teargas into the rooms of the students to smoke them out. The room caught fire, which was doused on time by the students. Doctors from the university medical college rushed more than ten ambulances to pick up the injured students, but the soldiers refused to allow them to rescue the students, and even broke the bones of one ambulance driver.

The team was shocked to find that a serving police officer on deputation from the UP cadre is appointed as Registrar of the university, and his attitude seemed that of a trigger-happy policeperson rather than a custodian of the students. He justified the police action as both necessary and restrained, and even spoke casually of the forces using stun grenades. These are devices to temporarily blind and deafen the enemy, known sometimes to cause injury and burst into flames. It is likely that this caused the student to lose his hand when he picked up a device which he thought was a teargas shell; and also, possibly the fire in the hostel rooms.

Stun grenades are used only in war situations, or militarised police action such as against dangerous terrorists, never to quell student protests. Their use does not form part of the SOPs of normal law and order disturbances. And even during war, ambulances are permitted to rescue the injured. Students spoke of soldiers and policepersons raising chilling slogans like Jai Shri Ram (popular with rioters and lynch mobs) while attacking the students and setting ablaze their scooters and vehicles. In the melee, exact figures are hard to verify, but the teachers and doctors we met estimate that around 100 students were picked up by the police, and another 100 were injured, 20 seriously.

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<sup>4</sup> 200-300 RAF personnel had been on standby on campus beforehand.

Boys were subsequently chased and picked up from roads, hostel and library premises and hostel rooms. According to a student who was subsequently detained, he was picked up by the police as he was trying to exit the library. In the student residence Morrison Court, they forcefully entered the building, assaulted unsuspecting students and used tear gas within a hostel room. They also beat up elderly hostel guards in the process. Almost always, attacks by police and RAF were coupled with rampant use of strong islamophobic slurs and calls for '*Jai Shri Ram*'. This mayhem, initiated at the behest of the university administration and unleashed by the U.P police and RAF personnel continued till 3:00 am.

By the time the first ambulances tried to reach the site, the police and RAF had reached the Engineering College - a distance of over a kilometre from the Gate. Video footage and on ground report show policemen destroying motorbikes and scooters parked within the university campus. Several vehicles are currently reported missing. Teachers report that as the police entered from the Bab-e-Syed Gate, all other gates to and from the campus were closed, allowing neither students from exiting nor teachers from entering the campus.

As doctors from the University Medical College began receiving calls for help from students, they sent a total of nineteen ambulances to the site. At the time, the doctors at the hospital received instructions from the Proctor that university ambulances should not be sent out to aid the students. As a result, only three of the nineteen ambulances were from AMU, the rest were private ambulances arranged by the doctors' association. These ambulances did three rounds to the site and back. With the roads blocked, many of them were unable to reach the injured students and returned empty handed.

One ambulance driver and his ambulance were beaten up by the police near the guest house. Despite explaining to the policemen that he was only an ambulance driver here to tend to the wounded, they beat him up, confiscated the ambulance's keys and vandalised the vehicle. The driver had to then return to the hospital with a broken hand, in the ambulance that was behind him. The destroyed ambulance was lying at the Staff Club until next morning. Due to threats of violence from the police and RAF, several ambulances that went to the site had to return midway, without picking up any injured student.

Eventually, about 50-60 students were taken to University Medical College from the site before the ambulances were stopped. Doctors estimate that there are many injured individuals who have not reached the hospital. There are reports of students in private medical colleges in the town – we do not have exact numbers yet. Around 3 am on the 16<sup>th</sup>, the nearly 60 students admitted in the trauma centre were asked to leave (not by the hospital) under fears that the police may pick them up from the hospital. Doctors reports that police and RAF vans were stationed on the other end of the hospital, but they did not come in. Due to the hurried dispersal several students therefore were not given discharge cards. Medico Legal Certificates were created for the willing students and those with grievous injuries.

Fearing violence, several students had spent the night of the 15th in various university buildings where they could find an immediate hideout. Some even spent the cold night on the rooftop terraces of hostel buildings. In the morning of the 16th, as it seemed that the roads had become safe, students began returning to their hostels or venturing to the dining hall for breakfast. However, some of them were attacked by RAF personnel on 16<sup>th</sup> morning between 7 and 8 am outside the Chemistry department and the central canteen. In two separate incidents reported, individual students were beaten with lathis and boots, and communal slurs were used.

### **Weapons used**

Based on students' and teachers' testimonies, video footage, medical opinion, remarks of administration, and physical evidence on site, we can confirm that tear gas shells, sound bombs, rubber bullets, stun grenades and lathis were used on the students. They had also resorted to stone pelting. Doctors have confirmed that the blunt force trauma and resultant brain haemorrhage of a student indicate to the use of rubber bullets. The hand of a PhD student had to be amputated from below the wrist due to the injuries sustained from a stun grenade that exploded in his hand. By the time this fact-finding team reached the campus on 17th afternoon, most traces of destruction and explosives had been cleaned from the now-desolate university campus, except for one tear gas shell that we saw still lying in the internal lawns of the Staff Club. In the same video footage shot from the police's end, a policeman is seen holding and then trying to hide a pistol. However, no bullet injuries have been reported. The Registrar also confirmed to us use of stun grenades, tear gas and water cannons.

## **Religious slurs used**

Unfortunately, both students and teachers report that it is not uncommon for the police personnel in Aligarh to use phrases such as 'you are not here to study, you are here for spread terrorism' towards Muslim students, even outside of the incidents since the 10th. However, their strong usage by uniformed men in riot-gear as they beat up and detained students, and destroyed parked vehicles and ambulances has left the students and faculty of the university extensively traumatised. According to one student, 'it looked as though the police had a deep-seated hatred towards us which they wanted to vent by treating us in the most barbaric manner'.

While the police were attacking students, they used religiously charged terms such as '*katua*', '*haram se paida hue*' and '*aatankvaadi*', alongside calls of violence such as '*saamne se maaro*' and '*maaro saalon ko*'. When the RAF entered Morrison Court hostel and when they were destroying vehicles on campus, they were heard shouting slogans such as '*Bharat Mata ki Jai*' and '*Jai Shri Ram*'. They also continued to call the students in the hostels '*aatankvaadi*'.

A student was picked up by the RAF near VM hall and was later found unconscious in an RAF car. He was allegedly, according to reports of both students and teachers, strangled by the RAF personnel as they shouted '*bolo Jai Shri Ram*' at him. Students report that when the police and RAF forcefully entered hostels, they targeted those guards who had beards. It has been alleged that some detained students were forced to drink alcohol in custody and then tortured (but doctors did not comment on this, so we cannot confirm this). Students and teachers report that students from the North-East and Kashmir have been under higher risk of being targeted, both during the violence and their travels home.

## **Violence on those detained**

On the 16th, after demands were made at the DMs office by groups of students and faculty, the District Administration said that they will release '25-26 students', while also claiming that of these, only 5-6 are students and the rest are 'outsiders'. Eventually, they released 26 students on bail by 10:00 pm, 16th December - this is as reported by the teachers. The

students have added that since they released students at different times and places, they have been unable to understand both the scale of detention and the extent of injuries sustained.

A detained student, who did not take part in the protest, reported that as he was trying to exit the campus after leaving the library, him and others were kettled to the circuit house, where they were beaten badly, and communal slurs were yelled at them. They were five students, who were then loaded onto a truck. Their phones were snatched and destroyed immediately. They were beaten on the way and eventually taken to the Akrabad Police Station, 25 kilometres away from the Bab-e-Syed gate. At the police station, they were stripped naked and asked to lie down on a *dari* on the floor, face down. They were then beaten with leather belts. When they were being brought back to the campus, a police man further pressed down on his broken hand throughout the way. When he got back, he found blue ink on his right thumb (still intact at the time of interview). He does not remember where it came from or how it was used. There are severe and deep wounds to his body from the beatings during detention. He also appeared to be severely shaken, speaking in a low voice and scared to record his testimony in an affidavit.

## **Medical injuries**

Based on the cases handled by doctors at University Medical college, students have suffered extensive injuries, with many requiring intensive care. Those who were detained have soft tissue damage corresponding to blunt force trauma from the lathis and belts that were used to beat them. Students also have fractures and deep open wounds. As a result of the violence on campus, one student has a skull fracture with brain haemorrhage and associated seizures and nausea. Two students have extensive tissue damage from stun grenades, with one person having to undergo below wrist amputation. One student faced severe respiratory issues and irritation to the eyes from the tear gas shot near the gate. He had to be taken to the hospital immediately and was unconscious for more than four hours. Considering the extent of tear gas usage, cases like this, both reported and unreported, are innumerable. Teachers report that on the morning of the 16th, when the campus was expressly being cleaned, they found a cut-off thumb on the road.

## **Mental health**

Testimonies of doctors, students and teachers indicate towards the severe psychological trauma and fear that the students in the university are under. Doctors report that the nature and scale of events that unfolded on the 15th night and the hurried eviction on the 16th have put students under severe stress, that can clearly cause Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Many of them, especially those detained, have shown typical symptoms such as refusal to talk about what happened. Memories of the difficult hours have also blacked out for some. The doctors were quick to note that the troubles of the students are nowhere near the end since complete symptoms of PTSD usually manifest only after about six months from the incidents. This is even more worrisome since illnesses such as this are often difficult to prove in courts that are insensitive to mental health issues.

Beyond this, the fear of further persecution by the authorities have kept the people of AMU under great stress. Everyone we spoke to, students, faculty and doctors alike, are clearly shaken. Because of fears of being targeted later, several injured students are afraid to have MLCs made or have their names included in any official ways.

## **Conclusion**

The university leadership ordered the immediate vacation of the hostels. The police action occurred on the night of the 15<sup>th</sup>. We visited on the 17<sup>th</sup> morning. Already by then, most of the 21000 resident students had been forced out of the hostels. These include students from Kashmir and the North-East afraid to travel to these troubled parts, impoverished students unable to muster the resources to suddenly travel home, and most who couldn't get train reservations.

Female students note that on the morning of the 16th, they were asked to urgently evacuate the hostel by 2 pm. When some women requested to stay, they were told that the dining hall will be closed and that the hostel authorities will not take responsibility for the students' safety. Statements like 'leave or we will throw you out in the open' were also made. In the

men's hostel, threats of electricity and water supply being cut off were made and police personnel were outside the hostel gates to oversee the eviction.

The university did organize buses for students to go to Jammu and other distant locations beyond 350 kilometres; even so, the forced overnight vacation of the hostels and immediate closure of the dining rooms showed they were uncaring about their safety and welfare, even of women students, and simply wanted to empty the university to quell the protests. At the time this fact-finding committee was at AMU, female students from Kashmir were on their way on an over 24-hour journey in a rickety bus to Jammu, where they were most likely to be stranded due to high ticket prices to Kashmir.

We need to reflect on what has brought us to this point in the journey of our republic. Police surcharged with communal hatred invade a central university, attacking students brutally, supported by the university administration. The simultaneous attacks on the two leading universities with a majority of Muslim students seem to have been designed to crush them into acquiescence, using the playlist of Kashmir, even shutting off internet in Aligarh. The Prime Minister tries to stigmatise the protests as those by Muslims, instigated by mutinous 'Urban Naxals' (presumably including the writers of this report).

The pushback by students in universities around the country is heartening. This must be sustained at all costs. Too much is at stake. Do we want a state that bludgeons students into submission? And do we want a government to create as lesser citizens children of a 'lesser god'? If we allow this to become a land in which students cannot protest injustice, who will show us the way?